

GURDWARA IN THE HIMALAYAS

SRI HEMKUNT SAHIB

Suparna Rajguru

M.S. Siali



Hemkunt

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Location Plan Gurdwara Hemkunt



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FOREWORD

That faith can, indeed, move mountains has been proved time and again by the stirring story of the Sikhs over the last 500 years. This time proof of their will and determination is provided by the Gurdwara at Hemkunt Sahib, built at a height of 15,210 ft. in the higher reaches of the Himalayas, where they claimed a site from the mountains for erecting a shrine to their faith with a remarkable degree of perseverance and self-assurance.

The odds against which the builders worked were astonishing. Since no human beings can exist at such heights around the year because of winter snows - which fall from October to June and can pile up to heights of 25 feet- workers, supervisors and *sewadars* were able to work for only 3 to 4 months a year. And even then they had to contend with the rainy season from July to mid-September, and with the flow of *yatris*. So for 33 years, from the time the project began in 1967 till the present time, when finishing touches to the interior of the building are still being given, there has been no slackening in the efforts to build this wondrous edifice to their faith. Such feats of endurance, of almost primal energy, are impossible without an emotional investment which alone can move mountains.

The Gurdwara's design is a marvel of structural engineering. Because of heavy winter snowfall the building is buried under 25 feet of snow and completely lost to sight for the better part of the year. When the snows start melting in May-June each year the Gurdwara emerges unscathed, invincible, and inspiring, having withstood one or more natural calamities like landslides, avalanches, high velocity winds, flooding, and earthquakes which can measure 6.5 to 7.5 on the Richter scale.

Its design is worthy of the indestructibility of the faith it represents. Despite their path-breaking achievements in so many diverse fields, Sikhs lack communication skills. Which is odd considering their pragmatism and pioneering instincts on the one hand, and the limitless opportunities open in the field of communications - the much sought-after *mantra* of the new millennium - on the other. For this reason Sardar Manmohan Singh Siali's commitment to this book, from the conceptual stage to seeing it published, deserves the gratitude of all who wish to see the vision and will of our people brought to the attention of people all over the world. But this is only one of his achievements, his most remarkable being his design of the Gurdwara, and the single-mindedness with which he dedicated himself to its construction.

Patwant Singh

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PREFACE

After seeing a photograph of Hemkunt Gurdwara in the book titled “*GURDWARAS in India and around the World*”, I went to meet its author S. Patwant Singh in order to congratulate him for publishing one of the best photographs of Hemkunt Gurdwara in his book. During the course of the meeting, I told him the whole story of the design and development of the Hemkunt Gurdwara and the physical and climatic constraints which we encountered during its construction. Among the most taxing difficulties was the transportation of materials to this almost inaccessible site. Also constructing the structure at a height of 15,210 ft. above the sea level where the temperature changes every two to three hours and the efficiency of the labourer is reduced to less than half as compared to the plains.

After listening to the narration, S. Patwant Singh felt that although the achievements of the Sikh community were numerous, they were poorly documented and people knew very little about them. The battle of Chillianwala fought between the Sikhs and the British on 13th January 1849 was one such example. It was a remarkable display of heroism which would have stayed outside historical records but for the British Army which has documented the account of the battle, in memory of British lives lost that day. A memorial has also been erected on the grounds of Chelsea’s Royal Hospital in London and wreaths have been placed there for the last 150 years.

Thus, this book is an outcome of our inspiration to collect material which has been lying at various places including a compilation of the historical knowledge on Hemkunt, the *tapasthan* of *Dusht Daman*. Sardar Patwant Singh has been quite instrumental in encouraging us to write a book on Hemkunt Sahib.

Suparna Rajguru and I are indebted to him for inspiring us to undertake this task. We would further like to thank Ms. Heather Michaud, a Research Scholar of University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, who did her thesis on Hemkunt and permitted us to use text and photographs from her published thesis. We are also grateful to Prof. Rosemary Sachdev, a practising Australian architect, who has made an invaluable contribution in the form of many helpful suggestions. These efforts can be further detailed not only for the Sikh community but also for others who would like to make the impossible possible in this world.

M.S. Siali

SIKHISM - *The Religion of Thought and Action*

1

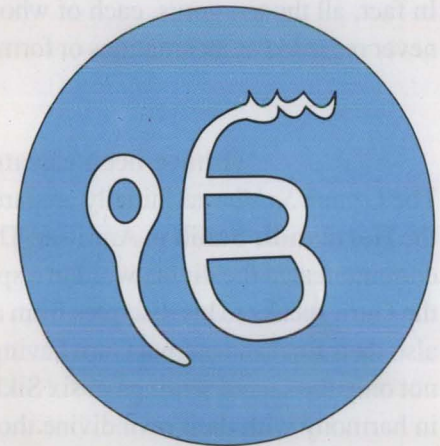


The Sikh Nishan

The austere colour of saffron fluttering high in the breeze. Framed against the lofty indigo of the sky. The *Nishan Sahib* (religious flag staff), standing, proud, in front of shrines that glow in marble splendour. The air is rent with the tunes of the *shabads* (devotional hymns) and the passages read from the *Guru Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs). There is a sense of tranquility that flows into one as soon as one enters the *Gurdwara* (the Sikh house of prayer). Hands folded in devotion, hands having just held the warmth of the *karah parsad* (a sacred offering consisting of flour, sugar and ghee made for the God and then distributed to all who visit the Gurdwara). Heads bowed in silent prayer and in awe at the beauty of it all.

Sikhism, the youngest amongst the mainstream religions in the world, has been described as the religion that combines the rationale of thought with the energy of action. Truly, it is a religion that comprises of a people for whom spontaneity and vigour are keywords. Upholding the *Granth Sahib* as their supreme Guru, the people are imbued with a sense of confidence, faith, pride and love that the teachings impart to them.

The birth of Guru Nanak (in Dera Baba Nanak near Lahore in present Pakistan) in 1469, heralded the origin of Sikhism. When a new religion is born, it consists of a plethora of philosophies and thoughts that it accepts, rejects and adds to from various other religions. Born and bred amidst Indian soil and culture, Sikhism shared certain facets with other religions but also differed in many respects. It maintained a separate and distinct identity with its own line of traditions, but upheld all other religions and faiths with equal respect. It was Guru Nanak who gave the religion of Sikhism its monotheistic identity. It is he who coined the *mul mantra* (the key prayer): **'IK ONKAAR'** (God is one), **'SATNAAM'** (Truth is His Name), **'KARTA PURAKH'** (He is the Creator), **'NIRBHAU'** (He is without fear), **'NIRVAIR'** (He is beyond birth and death- The Enlightened One), **'GUR PARSAAD'** (He can be known by the Guru's Grace). It is the prayer that explains the entire concept of this religion. **It is this unitary nature of God that forms the very core of the Sikh school of thought.**



IK ONKAAR
(GOD IS ONE)

The pioneer of this religion, Guru Nanak (AD 1469-AD 1539), was conferred with the title of 'Guru' as he was the initiator of the religion and thus the teacher. 'Sikh', as the followers called themselves, is a term that originated from the Sanskrit word '*shishya*' (disciple) and further from its derivatives '*sikhya sikkha*'. This further exemplified the attachment to the Guru as the word '*sikhya*' itself led to the reality of the existence of a 'Guru'. It was through these gurus-ten of them (between AD 1469-AD 1708)-that the religion was revealed. Founded by Guru Nanak, the religion was further strengthened by the thoughts of his nine successors. The process of succession began with Guru Nanak and culminated with the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). It was he who proclaimed that from then on, it would be the *Guru Granth Sahib* that would be regarded as the **Supreme Guru**, all others but slaves of God and could not be equated with Him. This equation, if done, would lead to dire consequences. As can be seen from this saying of Guru Gobind Singh, taken from *Dasam Granth* (verses of the tenth Guru):

*Jo mujkho parmashwar uchre,
Wo narak kund mein pare.*

(Beware whomsoever equates me with Him, he shall perish in hell.)

In fact, all the ten gurus, each of whom consolidated the Sikh Faith in his own way, have always been revered as 'spiritually enlightened' persons but never regarded as incarnations or forms of God. As Guru Gobind Singh points out in *Dasam Granth*:

*Inhi ki kripa se, Saje hum hain,
Nahi mo se garib karor pare.*

(I have been elevated by the grace of these people- the Sikhs. Otherwise there are millions of poor like me.)

The *Granth Sahib* was initially prepared by the fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606 AD) in 1604 at Amritsar and installed in the holiest of Sikh shrines the **Harmandir Sahib** in Amritsar. The *Granth Sahib* is regarded as **unique** as it consists solely of hymns of meditation of God-inspired men who have communicated the divine word in a spirit of deep humility and compassion for mankind. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the Guru's own book through which the Guru speaks to his disciples from age to age. Thus, it is also called **Gurubani** (the guru's voice). This is not only the holiest scripture of the Sikhs but also their final and eternal Guru having been installed as such at Nanded in Maharashtra, in 1708 AD by Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708 AD). It contains not only the sacred writings of six Sikh gurus but also those of thirty medieval Hindu saints, Muslim sufis and other holy personalities which were found in harmony with their own divine thoughts and teachings. Most of the latter personalities belonged to the so called low castes and Dalit, depressed or untouchable classes. The *Granth Sahib* was the embodiment of this devotion of God. Thus was born among the Sikhs, a deep commitment to the Holy book. For the Sikhs, the *Granth Sahib*-compiled in the year 1604, **is not just a sacred text but a living Guru**. It is the origin of Sikh faith. The origin of the Sikh school of thought- both spiritual and social. It is the *Granth Sahib* that Sikhs turn to when looking for solace and guidance. Sikhism is hence also called a **religion of the text**. Guru Gobind Singh was also instrumental in giving a section of the Sikhs-the Khalsas- a distinctive identity, not just physically but in terms of spirit. He wanted the Sikhs to be easily distinguishable even from a distance. But since this trait would make them vulnerable to the prevalent Mughal atrocities, he wanted them to be fearless and be able to defend themselves. The Guru wanted them to be **strong in spirit and body**. As he mentions in the *Bachitra Natak* (an autobiographical text) which forms a part of the *Dasam Granth*:

*Chidiya naal main baaz ladava,
Tabhi Guru Gobind Singh naam kahawa*

(I will make the sparrows capable of fighting the hawks, for it is only then that I will be able to uphold my name.)

Hence, on the 30th day of March in the year 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created the '*Khalsa*' (the pure); from a gathering that he was addressing at Anandpur Sahib, he selected **five** people whom he believed to be fearless in spirit and called them the '*panj piare*' (the five beloved ones). **Thus was born the Khalsa** and the *panj piaras* formed its first order. Guru Gobind Singh then himself, was inducted into the order by the newly baptised, thus equating himself with the Khalsa. He also instructed the Khalsa to wear **five** symbols which would distinguish them as such. These five symbols beginning with the letter 'k' were: *kirpan* (sword), *kesh* (long hair), *kangha* (comb), *kara* (steel wristband), and *kacch* (shorts). Ever since then, **the number five has assumed a religious significance**. In addition to the wearing of five symbols, the Khalsa men would also have to add the word '*Singh*' (lion) to their names not only to impart a sense of bravery but also to **equate the status of each and everyone and do away with the caste names**. Likewise, the Khalsa women would add the word '*Kaur*' (princess) to their names to do the same.



The Panj Piaras

The sense of equality is predominant not only within the Sikh society but is also reflected in their attitude towards other people, as can be illustrated from the incident of Bhai Kanhaiya, a water bearer. At a time of ongoing battle with the Mughals, it was reported to Guru Gobind Singh that Bhai Kanhaiya was giving water to the members of the enemy camp. Bhai Kanhaiya was promptly summoned and asked to explain his doings. His reply to the Guru was that he gave water to the wounded, without noticing whether the persons was a friend or a foe. Pleased with the answer, the Guru handed him medicinal balm and instructed him to make use of it on the wounded to whom he gave water. It is this sense of equality that makes no distinction between friend or foe, man or woman caste or creed. It prevails on all.



Bhai Kanhaiya giving water to the wounded

The Sikh approach to life is not that of self-withdrawal but that of being very much a part of social life and doing one's duty. It believes in an amalgamation of the spiritual and social to achieve a perfect balance. A harmonisation of these two factors allows a person to develop simultaneously as an individual and a social being. It was during the time of Guru Ram Das that the virtues of *nam japna* (remembering the Divine name), *kirat karna* (earning a living through honest means) and *wand chhakna* (sharing one's earnings with the needy) were nurtured. These were the virtues which according to the Guru, constituted ideal Sikh conduct and these could only be incorporated while one was a part of society. Hence, the **community** holds prime importance in Sikhism as it is a religion that has its principles deeply rooted in the social set up.

The first virtue of **Nam Japna** or the recitation of the name of God can be done when one is alone but is encouraged through *sangat* (congregation). *Kirtans* (devotional hymns set to the tune of certain ragas), a way of chanting the name of *Waheguru* (the Almighty), evoke the best response in one's self when sung in *sangat*. The role of *sangat* has been highlighted in the Sikh tradition and emphasises the need for social involvement and commitment. It is an ideal medium for inspiring the individual to participate in social life as a member of an ideal social unit. The second of these virtues is that of **Kirat Karna** which tells a Sikh to do honest labour without exploiting anyone. The third virtue, **Wand Chhakna**, encourages the Sikh to share with other what is earned through honest means. This incorporates the principles of *daswandh* and *langar*. *Daswandh*, literally means one-tenth of one's income and a true Sikh is supposed to donate the amount. Since not all Sikh can donate that much, they give whatever they can. Even a single rupee is worth a million when it has been earned of honest labour. *Langar* (the community kitchen which feeds everyone free of cost) is yet another way of sharing amongst the community. The establishment of institutions like *sangat*, *kirtan* and *langar*, put Sikh social values into practice, like the strong feeling of kinship amongst the community. It is a feeling that binds all irrespective of caste, creed and colour. Sikhism has been coined as a religion of 'spirit'-one that stresses not only on the relationship between man and God but also on the importance of relationships amongst mankind. It believes in equality of people and hence makes no distinction between caste, creed, colour or gender. The concept of *langar*, which requires people to sit and eat together, strengthens this belief. In fact, this virtue which was nurtured by Guru Ram Das has been given utmost importance. As the saying goes:

Pehle pangat, pichhe sangat
(First eat together and then worship together.)

This stresses that one can worship God only when one sees every human being as He does as equal. It can also be understood from the saying '*Sarbat da bhala*' which means and also generates a feeling of goodwill towards all. Sikhism rejects social divisions of every kind and preaches that what helps man ultimately is **not** what caste he is born in but what he does. In a religion where the position of a person is determined by one's deeds, the spirit of *sewa* (voluntary work done as part of the duty of a Sikh) holds immense significance. **For the service of humanity is deemed the service rendered unto God himself.**

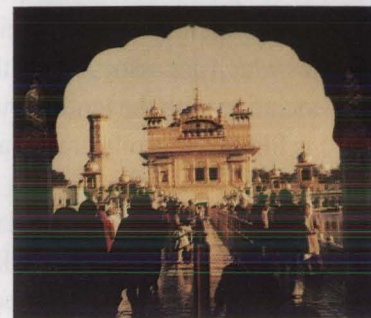


Devotees taking Langar

THE GURDWARA - The House of Prayer

It is here that one must stress the significance of the gurdwara, **for it is the gurdwara that stands as the epitome of all the principles that constitute the Sikh faith.** It is the place towards which a Sikh turns to at all times, in times of any celebration, in times of grief, in devout moments, in moments of solace and in times when one needs a sense of direction. This is primarily so because the gurdwara houses the *Guru Granth Sahib* which has been the source of inspiration for centuries for all Sikhs at all times.

The gurdwara, started as a *dharam-mandir* or *dharamshala*, was established by Guru Nanak. Since Guru Nanak had asked his followers to congregate for *kirtans*, these were the places where *sangats* would be held. With the fourth guru, Guru Ram Das, the faith was further consolidated with the founding of the holy city of Amritsar (*Amrit*-nectar and *sar-sarovar* or lake, the name meaning the city with the lake of nectar said to possess healing powers). The foundation of the *dharamshala* that was established here was laid by a *Pir* (a Muslim saint), by the name of Mian Mir Sahib, to emphasise that **everyone**, irrespective of his or her religion, was welcome to pray in this house. But the major step towards the concretion of this house of prayer was taken by the fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev, who felt **the need to build a place which would become the core of Sikhism.** He wanted to translate this concept into a form that would not only stand as a symbol for the religion but would serve as a source of inspiration to all Sikhs. Guru Arjan Dev wanted each of the design elements of the form to stand for a particular aspect of the religion. He visualised a structure set in the centre of a *sarovar* (pond) which was to be considered sacred. The structure would have four entrances - each of which was to stand for the four castes. This was to highlight that aspect of Sikhism in which everyone is considered equal and thus was welcome to the shrine. **This structure was to be called 'harmandir' meaning the temple of God.**



Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar

But Guru Arjan Dev soon realised that a vacant shrine alone could not be an inspiration for long. It had to contain a source which would continue to inspire the followers of the faith with each visit to the shrine. Guru Arjan Dev believed that Sikh scripture, which would contain the thoughts and sayings of the gurus and the various perceptions and principles that constituted the faith, would instill a deep sense of devotion. Keeping this in mind, he began assembling a plethora of writings including those of Hindu and Muslim scholars and revered saints like Jaidev, Kabir, Ravi Das, Sheikh Farid, Namdev and Ramanand. Penned into *Gurmukhi* script (the written language of the Sikhs) by Bhai Gurdas, the scripture was compiled into book form and given the name *Granth Sahib* and later referred to as *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Guru Granth Sahib* was composed to the tune of 31 *ragas*. After a schedule of careful edition and presentation, the book reached its initial volume of 1948 pages which was later standardised to 1430 pages.

In the year 1604, the newly compiled *Guru Granth Sahib* was placed in the *harmandir*, the present day Golden temple at Amritsar, Punjab. **The harmandir then assumed the proportions of an entity around which the entire faith lived and revolved.** Such was its importance that it was replicated and established wherever the Sikhs were... in cities, in neighbourhoods, in their homes and wherever the *harmandir* was set up it became the centre of that establishment.

These houses of prayer came to be known as '*gurdwaras*' (houses of the guru) during the time of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind. Soon the gurdwara developed into a complex in which all the ideal Sikh virtues were practised. The complex comprised of various features, both religious and social like the *langar* hall, residences for the inmates including the *Granthi* (the person who reads the *Guru Granth Sahib*), rest houses for the pilgrims and often a *gurmat vidyalaya* (a school where children are taught how to read, understand and recite the *Gurbani*). Gurdwaras thus, became and continue to be institutions for teaching the practice of *sewa*.

Each of the gurdwaras situated in every part of the world, is the recipient of much respect and adulation from the Sikh community. But there are some gurdwaras which, because of their exceptional characteristics and historical back drop are held in high esteem by Sikhs everywhere. These gurdwaras are the ones which are associated with significant historical events. Sri Hemkunt Sahib is one such gurdwara. Its unique location in the mighty Himalayas and its association with the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in his earlier birth, places it very high on the list of much revered gurdwaras. In fact, a visit to this place is likened to a pilgrimage and constitutes an integral part of a Sikh's life.

High in the Uttar Pradesh Himalayas, near the source of the Ganges and cradled amidst seven lofty peaks of snow, is the lake of Hemkunt. The gurdwara is located on the banks of this lake. Placed at a height of 15,210 ft. above sea level, the gurdwara is rendered inaccessible from October to June because of heavy snowfall. But with the advent of summer and the monsoon, the place springs to life and becomes a riot of colour and activities. Pilgrims come in vast numbers and brave their way up the steep path that meanders through the mountains. Chanting prayers, they pay obeissance to the tenth guru and return with the feeling of being truly blessed.



Photograph of Hemkunt Gurdwara with its environs



According to legends, during the time of 'Sat Yug' (the age of truth), the goddess Durga was once engaged in a battle with demons who had been terrorising humans and gods alike. Seeking help, she fled to the mountains and came upon a great *rishi* (sage) who agreed to be of assistance to her. Since he was a *brahman* and could not be involved in a battle, he created a *khatti* (warrior) who could combat the demons. The *khatti*, clad in a lions skin and armed with a sword, slayed the demons after a fierce battle. Greatly pleased, the goddess Durga blessed him and conferred upon him the name *Dusht Daman* (the suppressor of evil). Whereafter, the *rishi* asked him to meditate at Hemkunt which was the site for meditation for many celestials. Hence, *Dusht Daman* performed an intense and prolonged meditation. He was then summoned by the Almighty to undertake the task of being reborn in 'Kal yug' (the age of darkness) to ward off evil from the face of the earth. **Thus, in his reincarnation, *Dusht Daman* was born as the son of the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur.**

The child guru grew up to be a great saint and a warrior. He organised his followers who believed in ONE WAHEGURU with limitless faith in Him, humility in rendering service to humanity and truthfulness and fearless in adversity. **He was the tenth guru Guru Gobind Singh.**



The Dasam Granth - verses written by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh

In his verses compiled in the volume, entitled *Dasam Granth*, there is a narrative that is autobiographical in nature and in the form of a dialogue between God and the Guru. It is in this narrative - known as the '*Bachitra Natak*' (the astounding drama), that Guru Gobind Singh has described his place of meditation as follows:

*Thus I narrate my biography,
Pleased with my deep, devoted and arduous worship of His name,
He (Waheguru) ordained events leading to my birth, to take place.*

*A snow clad mountain range with seven pinnacles (Sapatsring), which is a part of Sumer Parbat,
Surrounds a fathom less, fresh water lake by the name of Hemkunt.
This was the sacred place of my prayer meditation and worship of my Almighty.
This place was also visited by Pandava king during his exile.*

*This is the place where I performed
Unlimited meditation of concentration
On the name of Creator and Destroyer of the entire universe - the Waheguru.*

*It was due to the earnest prayer and deep desire of Guru Tegh Bahadur,
That I was summoned out of my deep trance at Sri Hemkunt Sahib to Waheguru's own kingdom.
And then ordained to be born in this world (Kal Yug),
With a special mission of service to the cause of humanity; of the poor, the oppressed and the down trodden.*

*I was so deeply immersed in His divine love,
That I did not wish to come away,
But had to bow to His commands and directions,
on which I was ordained to assume the mortal form.*

*While at His feet in Waheguru Ji's own kingdom where I was summoned from the place of my worship,
He bestowed His affection on me and addressed me as His dear son,
And uttered in His Grace that "I call upon you to proceed to fulfil the holy and sacred mission
Of showing the correct path to the wrong doers and to propagate truth and truthful living."*

*I accepted the orders with folded hands,
And in all humility prayed,
That the achievement of the set Aim was feasible only if I had His blessings.*

*So these were the terms of reference
With which I was directed to assume the human form.
And this exactly what was transgressed between the Almighty (Waheguru Ji) and me.*

(The above translation was done by Col. M.S. Sethi, Commander-21 B.R.T.F., who was posted at Joshimath during 1971-1974 and contributed tremendously in the mobilisation of construction material to Hemkunt.)

Although the *Dasam Granth* was compiled in 1734, the descriptions of Guru Gobind Singh's *tapasthan* (place of mediation) - **Hemkunt Parbat Sapatsring** - in the narrative '*Bachitra Natak*' drew attention only after a century of its compilation. Kavi Santokh Singh, a mid-nineteenth century historian, was the first person to elaborate on the story of the creation of *Dusht Daman* and his place of meditation (the Guru's *tapasthan*) in his fourteen volume *Sri Gur Partap Suraj (Parkash) Granth* which was first published in 1843. In the late nineteenth century, Pandit Tara Singh Narottam - a Nirmala scholar and Sikh historian - compiled a descriptive collection of various Sikh *tiraths* (places considered holy because they are associated with Gurus) which included Hemkunt.



Bhai Veer Singh

Bhai Veer Singh, an eminent Punjabi historian, reformer and poet, put together information about Hemkunt, which he collected from various sources like Guru Gobind Singh's *Bachitra Natak*, Kavi Santokh Singh's *Suraj Prakash* and Pandit Tara Singh Narottam's descriptions in *Sri Guru Tirath*. All this input resulted in the publication of an account by the name of *Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkar* (miracles of the plume-adorned one). Inspired by the many descriptions of the Guru's tapasthan, Sant Sohan Singh - a retired *granthi* from the Indian Army - resolved to search for the place. His search took him from one place to another but yielded no result. This quest for Hemkunt led him to one such place where he noticed pilgrims leaving for a certain pious location referred to as 'Lokpal'. On conversing with pilgrims, he discovered that the descriptions of Lokpal tallied with the accounts that he had read about Hemkunt. To confirm the information that he had gathered from the locals, Sant Sohan Singh decided to visit Lokpal and not only did he find the geographical details similar, he also experienced a celestial vision that made him believe that **this** indeed was..... **Hemkunt - the tapasthan of Guru Gobind Singh.**

Convinced of the location, he decided to build a gurdwara with Bhai Veer Singh's assistance, in commemoration of the significance that the place held. For this purpose, he was joined by *Havaladar* Modan Singh, a seargent from the Survey Department of the Indian Army. In the year 1935, they went to Hemkunt to build the gurdwara for which they hired the services of a contractor by the name of Ganga Singh Bhandari. During the construction process, the two Sikhs were assisted by the village chief Rattan Singh Chauhan, his son Nanda Singh Chauhan and other local dwellers. The construction of the gurdwara, measuring ten feet by ten feet, was completed by November of 1935 and it was so placed that it marked the *tapasthan* of Guru Gobind Singh in his earlier birth. **After the installation of a**

copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, gifted by Bhai Veer Singh, the gurdwara at Hemkunt was established as a gurdwara at the highest place in the world.



Havaladar Modan Singh

In this gurdwara, Sant Sohan Singh and *Havaladar* Modan Singh performed a devout service to the *Waheguru*. After the demise of Sant Sohan Singh, *Havaladar* Modan Singh was entrusted with the responsibility of the gurdwara. At times, when he would come down to Gobind Dham, he would take refuge in the hollowed out portion of a tree against the onslaught of bad weather and wild animals. This tree still stands in the courtyard of Gobind Dham and is much revered by the pilgrims. During winters, when *Havaladar* Modan Singh descended to the plains, he would tell enthralled devotees about the gurdwara at Hemkunt and the significance it held. Such was the magic of the descriptions and tales, that it did not take much time before pilgrims were drawn to Hemkunt. Amongst the initial *jathas* (group of pilgrims) was the one brought by Master Karm Singh. But since there was no marked path to this place, the journey was a tough ordeal. Each of the pilgrims had to be led by hand through the relentless terrain. This could only be done with the help of the village guides, amongst whom, was the village chief's son, Nanda Singh Chauhan. At one time, this tedious journey used to last for almost a month. With an increase in the number of *jathas*, there was



Sant Sohan Singh



General Harkirat Singh (extreme left) poses in front of the first gurdwara that was built at



To conserve the old Gurdwara which was constructed in November, 1935 with the local materials, the structure of enlarged Gurdwara was so placed that it became part and parcel of the new, falling under the valley truss, towards kunt/Lake side.

an urgent need to establish a proper pathway. This was done with the help of the locals under the supervision of the contractor, Hayat Singh Bhandari, and under Nanda Singh Chauhan who by then was well versed with the path. The increase in development led to a spurt in other developmental activities like the construction of *dharamshalas* etc. along the pilgrims route. In the month of March 1960, Havaladar Modan Singh established a seven member trust - **the Gurdwara Hemkunt Management Trust** - which was to take on various responsibilities connected with the seven gurdwaras along the route from Hardwar to Hemkunt. These are namely gurdwaras at Hardwar, Rishikesh, Srinagar, Joshimath, Gobind Ghat, Gobind Dham and Gurdwara Hemkunt. The subsequent chapter includes information about the initial members of the Hemkunt Trust.

The Trust felt the need to build a bigger gurdwara in place of the initial single-roomed building and were in the midst of deciding who should undertake the construction when one of the Trust members encountered General Harkirat Singh who was on a pilgrimage to Hemkunt. He revealed the expansion plans to the General and asked for his suggestions. As the General was one who could envisage a project with regard to the future, he suggested a plan which would accommodate around 400-500 people for a congregation. This, he felt, would be an apt number because the gurdwara was fast gaining recognition and with the improvement of the road, it would attract a large number of pilgrims in the near future. Sensing the truth in the suggestion and recognising his far sightedness, the Trust decided to entrust the responsibility of designing the gurdwara to the General.

THE HEMKUNT TRUST - *The Founder Members*

3

The seven member Sri Hemkunt Sahib Management Trust, started by Havaladar Modan Singh for the upkeep of the gurdwaras along the route to Hemkunt, consisted of the following erstwhile members - *Hav.* Modan Singh (Founder President), Lt. Col. Joginder Singh Mann (Secretary), S. Shamsheer Singh (Treasurer), Raghubir Singh Kabaria, S. Gurbaksh Singh Bindra and Col. Amar Singh.

Hav. Modan Singh (1883 - 1960)

Born in 1883 near Chandigarh, *Hav.* Modan Singh was trained at the Bengal Engineer group centre at Roorkee. He joined the Corp of Engineers as a sapper and had also worked with the Survey of India at Dehradun. During his tenure at Joshimath with the Infantry Brigade, he was motivated to look for Hemkunt as described in *Bachitra Natak*. Along with Bhai Sohan Singh, *Hav.* Modan Singh found the place that matched with the description. They thought of building a small gurdwara with meager resources. He was also responsible for getting humble structures built at Gobind Dham and Gobind Ghat. With an increase in the number of *Yatris* at the place, he realised the necessity to get larger structures built to accommodate the *sangats*. For this purpose, he founded a Trust to manage and attend to the activities of the gurdwaras.

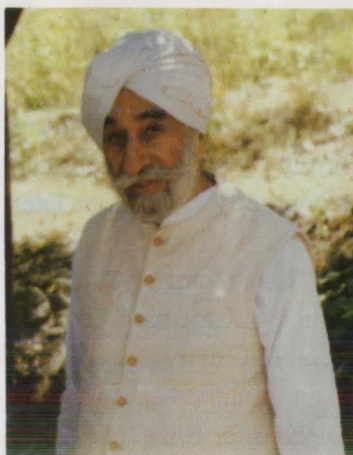


S. Madan Singh

Since 1954, he was being helped in the construction activities at both Gobind Ghat and Gobind Dham by S. Madan Singh. Being a founder member, *Hav.* Modan Singh spend most of the pilgrimage season assisting pilgrims between Gobind Ghat and Hemkunt. During the winters, he would climb down to the plains to collect donations from Sikhs devotees and visit his relatives and friends.



Havaladar Modan Singh



Col. Joginder Singh Mann

Col. Joginder Singh Mann

(1903 - 1997)

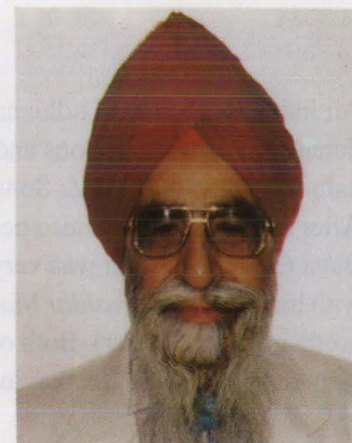
Colonel Joginder Singh Mann became the President of the Hemkunt Management Trust after the demise of Havaladar Modan Singh and held this esteemed position till the time of his death in 1997. He was a graduate from the Chief College Lahore and won the Rivaz Gold Medal as an outstanding student of the college. He became the member of the Punjab Assembly in 1937 and was subsequently re-elected for the next term. The honorary rank of Colonel was conferred upon him by the British for his services. He left behind 7500 acres of irrigated land in Pakistan and migrated to East Punjab and became a Minister of Rehabilitation in the first East Punjab Government. During the course of his Ministership, he helped to rehabilitate lakhs of refugees from West Punjab. He also became the speaker of the Punjab Legislative Assembly during the time of Akali Government.

During his tenure as the President of the Trust, he visited the United States of America where he used to propagate the activities of the Trust and Sikhism.

S. Shamsher Singh

(Born 1924)

S. Shamsher Singh migrated from western Punjab and settled down in Kanpur. A qualified engineer, he did his advanced studies from Germany in the early fifties. Amongst all the members of the Trust, he stood out as the most qualified and dedicated person. Possessing a magnetic trait in his personality, he has attracted people not only towards himself but also drawn them towards Hemkunt Sahib. At times, he has lead *jathas* which have numbered in thousands. The *jathas*, that he has led, usually comprise of devotees coming from the United States, the United Kingdom and Kenya and was responsible for the collection of large donations for buildings and langar. Although he has settled in New York, S. Shamsher Singh remains a very active member of the Trust as its General Secretary and spearheads all the developmental activities at Hemkunt Sahib. Undeterred by the distance, he regularly visits Hemkunt Sahib.



S. Shamsher Singh



*S. Raghbir Singh
Kabaria*

Raghbir Singh Kabaria
(1909-1986)

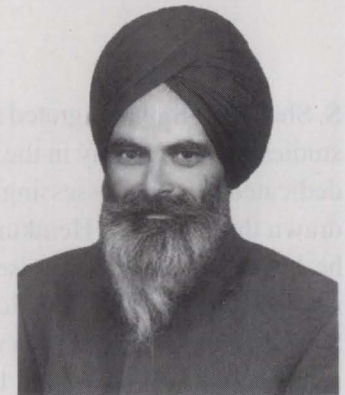
Hailing from a poor family, S. Raghbir Singh Kabaria rose to the heights of wealth through sheer hard work, dedication and belief in *Waheguru*. He would sell steel scraps and second hand motor parts, thus earning himself the tag of “**Kabaria**” (Rag Picker). But this did not hamper with his efforts, instead he went on to amass vast wealth and property. Even years later, he did not alter his surname, thus reiterating his humbleness.

His sincerity spoke volumes for him. He built a hotel in Kashmere Gate, Delhi which he named as “**Tera Hotel**” (your hotel) dedicating it to Him - the **Almighty**. S. Raghbir Singh Kabaria gave several donations to Hemkunt Management Trust for various construction projects. In fact, it was with his donation that construction of **Sri Hemkunt Sahib Gurdwara** could be initiated. He also got many gurdwaras and orphanages built in Delhi and lent a helping hand to all and sundry. He was a great disciple of Bhai Joga Singh. Consequently, two schools founded by S. Raghbir Singh were named after Bhai Joga Singh namely, Bhai Joga Singh Senior Secondary Girls Schools in West Delhi. He believed in “Proportion your charities to your income” and practiced this belief throughout his life. He was really a “**True Sikh**”.

Baba Gurmukh Singh
(1887-1979)

An industrialist from Ludhiana, Baba Gurmukh Singh was a humble and god fearing person. He was always ready to donate money for religious and charitable causes and got a gurdwara constructed in Ludhiana. He floated a firm by the name ‘Gurmukh Singh & Sons’ which is internationally known for the manufacture of motor parts exported to Japan. After his death, his son also became a member of the Hemkunt Trust.

Baba Gurmukh Singh was very close to *Havaladar* Modan Singh who also hailed from Ludhiana and would often stay with him. In fact, *Havaladar* Modan Singh was known to the family members of Baba Gurmukh Singh as *Tayaji* (the elder brother of one’s father). Both of them would exchange ideas about the Trust and discuss the need to build a gurdwara at Hemkunt in place of the previously existing single roomed one.

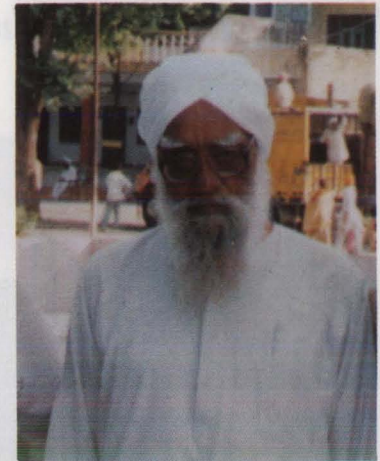


Baba Gurmukh Singh

S. Gurbaksh Singh Bindra
(Born 1911)

Having migrated from Pakistan, S. Gurbaksh Singh settled down in the northern region of India - first in Dehradun and later in Rishikesh, where he has lived since the last five decades. The acquiring of land for the various gurdwaras at Rishikesh, Srinagar, Joshimath and Gobind Ghat can be exclusively attributed to him. A dedicated and deeply religious person, S. Gurbaksh Singh travelled extensively throughout the region of Garhwal for the procurement of land and succeeded in doing so.

He has been associated with the above gurdwaras since the time of the search for Hemkunt having known *Havaladar* Modan Singh as well as the priest Sohan Singh and has witnessed the earlier construction activities at both Gobind Ghat and Hemkunt. Once a forest contractor, S. Gurbaksh Singh is credited for the development of all the above gurdwaras and commands equal respect from both the trustees and the pilgrims. Amongst the many activities that he manages at the Rishikesh gurdwara, is the responsibility of adopting orphans of Garhwal for the purpose of education in the gurdwara school, a responsibility that he has shouldered with efficiency. His congenial nature allows him to share a good rapport with the District Authorities which facilitate the various activities at all gurdwaras. A devoted person of integrity, S. Gurbaksh Singh took over as president of the Hemkunt Trust after death of S. Inderjit Singh in 1998.



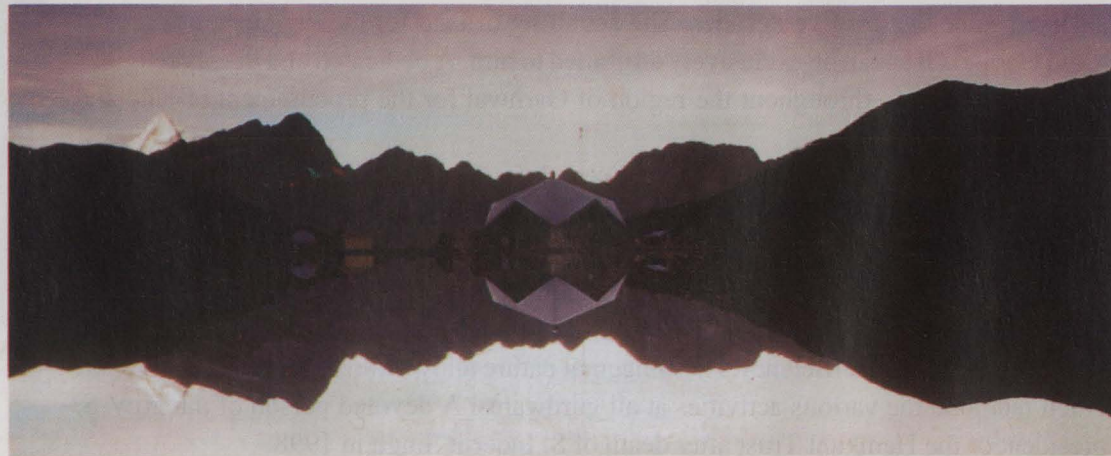
S. Gurbaksh Singh Bindra



Col. Amar Singh

Colonel Amar Singh
(1905 - 1962)

Colonel Amar Singh was nominated to the Trust by *Havaladar* Modan Singh. He retired as an Income Tax Commissioner and settled in Amritsar. Because of his ill health he could not take active part in the trust activities and died within two years of his association with the trust.



The Gurdwara, the house of prayer of the Sikhs, is recognised throughout the world not only as a prominent symbol of the Sikh faith but also for its distinct style of architecture. Although certain gurdwaras adapt an architectural identity similar to the style prevalent in the country in which they are built, on the whole - they are unified in terms of architectural characteristics. The gurdwara at Hemkunt, however, is singularly unique. Its location in the lofty Himalayas, at a height of 15,210 ft., makes it **the only gurdwara to be built at such an altitude**. Its design, which was done keeping in mind the location and climate, makes it **the only pentagonal gurdwara in the world**. Further, the gurdwara located at **Hemkunt** - the *tapasthan* of *Dusht Daman* - imparts it a high degree of respect.

The gurdwara at Hemkunt symbolises yet another aspect.... that of human effort, dedication and single-minded courage. It stands as an epitome of the human spirit that battles against obstructions to achieve its objective. The **objective**, here, was **the building of this gurdwara** and the **obstructions** were **the undulating terrain and the harsh climate**, and **the human spirit** - that of **all the people behind the project**. This chapter is an attempt to unravel the story of the effort that went behind the building of the Gurdwara at Hemkunt.

The design process involved detailed site and climatic surveys and rigorous analysis for the requirements were indeed tough parameters. The architect, Mr. Manmohan Singh Siali, rose to the occasion and delivered a design that conformed not only to the dictates of the site and climate but also to the religion itself. **The resultant design was a harmonious blend of crucial factors**. The success of the design can also be attributed to the far-sightedness of Gen. Harkirat Singh who was instrumental in suggesting several design factors with respect to the future.

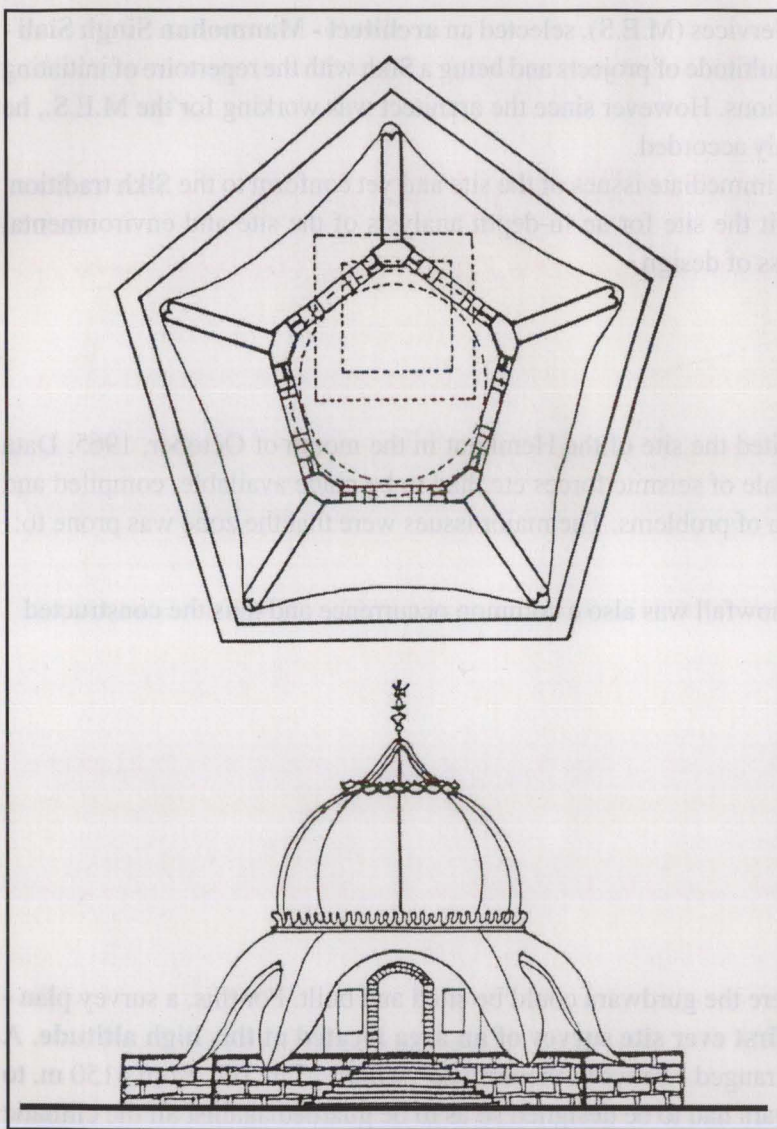


Fig 1 : The plan and elevation of the design proposed by S. Beant Singh

INITIAL DESIGN CONCEPT

When the Trust decided to build a bigger gurdwara in place of the single-celled unit, the initial design concept - shown in **Fig. 1** - was proposed by S. Beant Singh of Chandigarh. This concept was apparently designed without any knowledge of the site and the climatic conditions. When General Harkirat Singh was shown this design, by one of the Trust members for an appraisal, he could immediately detect the flaws. He felt that the concept was lacking not only in terms of satisfying the site and climatic constraints but also in terms of its size and capacity.

The proposed design which gave primary consideration to the religious aspect was averse to **the demands of the extremely difficult site and the climate** which were by far **the most important factors**. The heavily contoured site presented major construction constraints like its location in the seismic zone, being prone to snow avalanches and high velocity winds and the presence of the Hemkunt lake itself which should have been the primary factors that governed the design. As can be seen from the elevation, the proposed design would not have been able to withstand the prevalent site conditions. The proposed design was also not equipped to have a congregation of the number of people envisaged which was initially thought to be small. It was a suggestion from General Harkirat Singh that proved to be yet another crucial design factor. A man of rare vision, the General felt that with the growing passage of time the number of pilgrims and visitors would swell to hundreds at a time - a prediction which was to come true. He was of the opinion that 400-500 people would be the right number to accommodate in the congregation hall. Clearly, the proposed design was inadequate.

Agreeing with the opinions of General Harkirat Singh, the Hemkunt Trust entrusted him with the responsibility of finding the architect who could accomplish the project keeping in mind all the important factors.

The General, who at that time was the Engineer in Chief of the Military Engineering Services (M.E.S), selected an **architect - Manmohan Singh Siali** - from the same organisation. He felt that M. S. Siali, with the experience of handling a multitude of projects and being a Sikh with the repertoire of initiating architecture for gurdwaras, had the right expertise to handle a project of such dimensions. However since the architect was working for the M.E.S., he required official permission to take on an independent project. The permission was duly accorded.

The Hemkunt gurdwara posed a complex design problem because it had to tackle the immediate issues of the site and yet conform to the Sikh tradition. An experienced architect M.S. Siali knew that the **foremost** thing to do was to visit the site for an in-depth analysis of the site and environmental conditions to predetermine the problems that would be encountered during the process of design.

THE SITE

A team of architects and engineers, headed by the principal architect M.S. Siali, visited the site of the Hemkunt in the month of October, 1965. Data concerning factors like the terrain, climate, level of the lake, soil type, snow load, scale of seismic forces etc. had to be made available, compiled and analysed since the site could not be visited again and again. This site posed a plethora of problems. The major issues were that the zone was prone to:

- Snow avalanches and slides as it was surrounded by snow laden mountains. Snowfall was also a common occurrence and thus the constructed building would have to be designed to carry a certain snow load.
- Earthquakes, measuring 6.5 - 7.5 on the Richter Scale, being in a seismic belt.
- High velocity winds.
- Flooding due to rise in the level of the Hemkunt *sarovar* (pond).

Amongst the various things that had to be worked out and assessed was the land where the gurdwara could be sited and built. For this, a survey plan - **Fig. 2** - had to be drawn up. The Survey of India prepared what was to become the **first ever site survey of an area located at this high altitude**. A difficult terrain, the survey plan revealed that the level of its closely placed contours ranged - between themselves - within 25 m. (i.e. from 4150 m. to 4175 m. above sea level). The siting was a **crucial** factor not only because the gurdwara had to be designed so as to be guarded against all the climatic conditions but also had to be designed in order to be able to accommodate 400 - 500 people which was a substantial number. Besides which, the architect was keen that gurdwara be sited in such a way that the people inside could get a view of the picturesque surroundings of Hemkunt lake. Another factor to keep in mind while siting was that the initial gurdwara, which marked the *tapshila* of *Dusht Daman*, had to be incorporated in the new design.

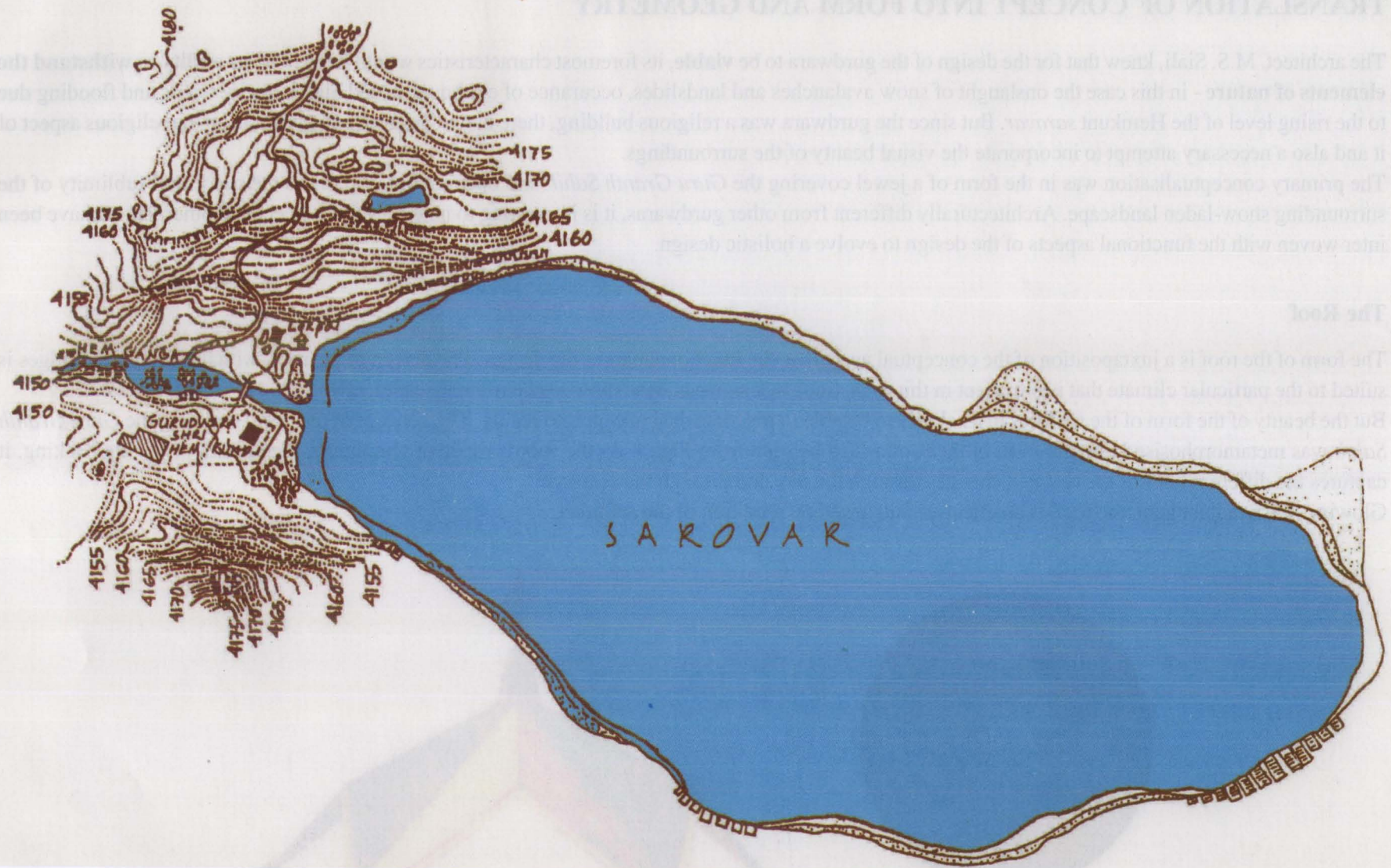


Fig. 2: The Survey Plan of the Hemkunt site, done by the Survey of India, one of the first such high altitude areas to be surveyed.

TRANSLATION OF CONCEPT INTO FORM AND GEOMETRY

The architect, M.S. Siali, knew that for the design of the gurdwara to be **viable**, its foremost characteristics would **have to be its ability to withstand the elements of nature** - in this case the onslaught of snow avalanches and landslides, occurrence of earthquakes and high velocity winds and flooding due to the rising level of the Hemkunt *sarovar*. But since the gurdwara was a religious building, there had to be an **equal** emphasis on the religious aspect of it and also a necessary attempt to incorporate the visual beauty of the surroundings.

The primary conceptualisation was in the form of a jewel covering the *Guru Granth Sahib* and opening out visually to the peace and sublimity of the surrounding snow-laden landscape. Architecturally different from other gurdwaras, it is interesting to note how the concept and other factors have been inter woven with the functional aspects of the design to evolve a holistic design.

The Roof

The form of the roof is a juxtaposition of the conceptual as well as the functional part of the design. The design of the roof, with its valleys and ridges is suited to the particular climate that is prevalent in this area. Such a design can bear snow load extremely efficiently.

But the beauty of the form of the roof lies in its ability to be able to translate the concept into reality. The concept of the jewel covering the *Guru Granth Sahib* was metamorphosed into the form of the roof as can be seen from **Fig. 3**. As the roof is made of aluminium sheets with Astro lite backing, it captures the different hues of the sky as it changes through the day and through the seasons.

Glowing like a radiant gem, the roof is an effective and aesthetic rendition of the architect.



Fig. 3: The metamorphosis - from concept to form.

The Plan Form

The overwhelming climatic conditions at the site of Hemkunt dictated the octagon - a derivation of the circle (a polygon of n sides) - as the most stable form that the plan could adopt. But the Hemkunt Trust negated the form of the octagon because it did not relate to the Sikh tradition of thought and belief in any way. It has to be kept in mind that the design of the gurdwara had to adhere to the tenets of the religion in some aspects because it was after all - a religious building. The roof form is different from the type of form that is usually seen in a typical gurdwara. But it was necessary to adopt this form due to the climate and not much could be done to alter it. In this case, the concept of the jewel was woven in with dexterity. The challenge, however, was to adopt a suitable plan form which would be a blend of both the Sikh religion and the dictates of the environment.

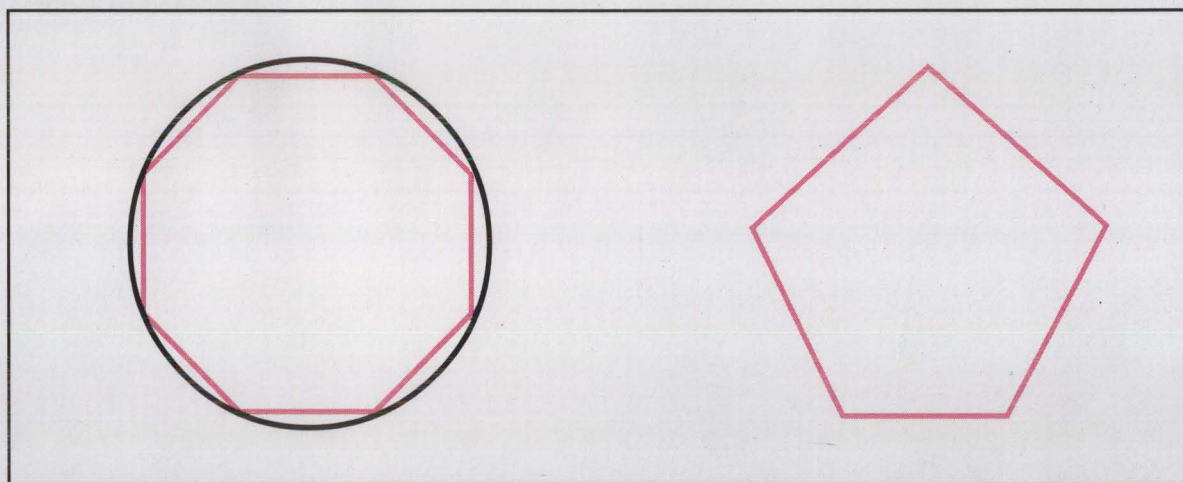


Fig. 3A: The challenge that was overcome-the pentagonal plan form that proved to be functional and symbolic.

After numerous discussions on various possibilities, a compromise was reached with the form of the **pentagon** - as seen in **Fig. 3A** - which, with some structural alterations, did justice to both. The pentagon, a five sided form, can be associated with the number 'five' - a number of religious significance in Sikhism. The **pentagonal plan form** makes the Hemkunt Gurdwara the **only** one of its kind in the world. The plan was meticulously worked out to be structurally viable after due strengthening of the structural members. This was done by running a continuous ring beam that bound the structural members at various levels. This was done separately for the R.C.C. and steel structures.

Till today, the gurdwara has braved avalanches, land slides and earthquakes, remaining intact and standing as a testimonial to the grit of its design team.



Fig. 4: An aerial view of the site showing where the gurdwara has been sited.

THE CRUCIAL ASPECT OF SITING

The siting of the gurdwara, as has been emphasised before, was crucial, keeping in mind the various factors involved. In a zone as difficult as this one, the surrounding visual beauty was secondary. With it being highly seismic and prone to avalanches, the **wrong siting** could have proved **fatal** for the building. A number of aspects had to be meticulously studied to avoid that mistake - wind direction and wind force, path of the avalanches (although some are unpredictable), maximum depth of the accumulated snow and, the rise in the level of the Hemkunt lake during the monsoons etc. All these studies would also reveal the type of building materials to be used for the construction of this shrine.

After a thorough analysis, it was decided that the gurdwara would be sited near the Hemkunt lake and placed in a direction parallel to the nearest rising hillock, as can be seen from **Fig. 5**. This positioning allowed the gurdwara to be shielded by that particular hillock during the occurrence of avalanches. It would also allow the new design to envelop amidst its wall the old gurdwara that had been built by *Havaladar* Modan Singh and which included amidst its premises the *tapshila* of *Dusht Daman*. The proximity to the Hemkunt lake would facilitate the innovational requirement of diverting a portion of the lake inside the gurdwara for the purpose of *ishnaan* (sacred bath) in private, for the women.

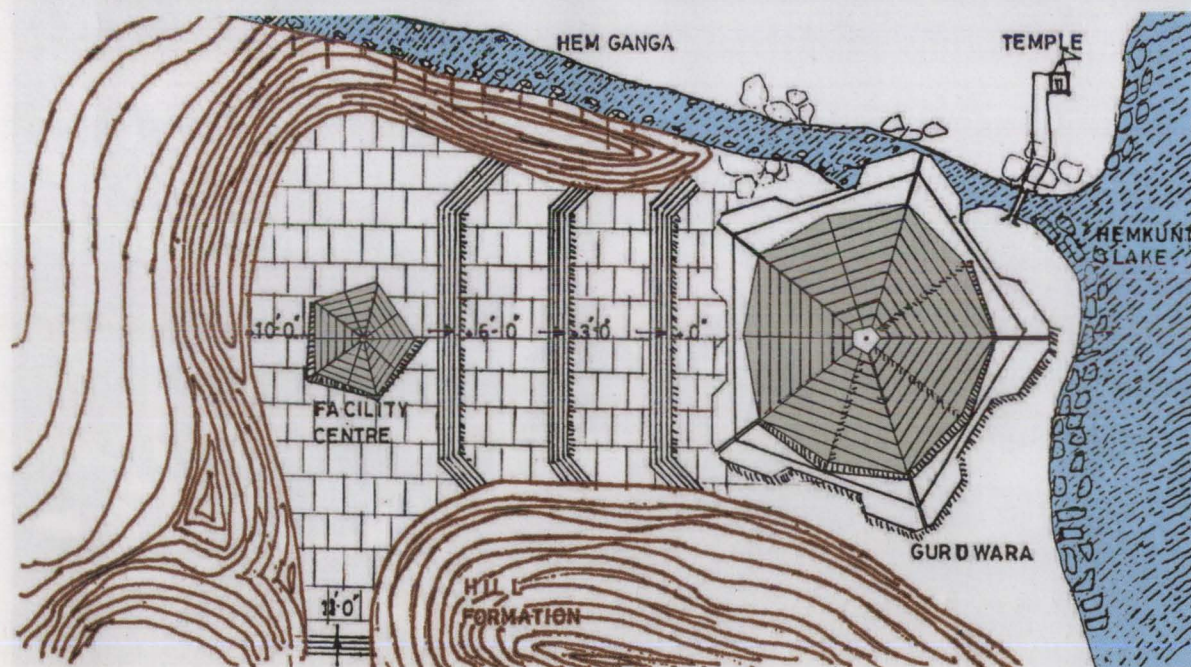


Fig. 5: The layout of the site

PLANNING THE LAYOUT

The layout concentrates on the gurdwara itself, thus giving it the emphasis it deserves. A levelled platform, where one dismounts from the mode of travel, leads downwards to the front steps of the gurdwara. Along the line of the main axis is the *Nishan Sahib* and a resting room which echoes the geometry of the gurdwara itself. As one walks past the right side of the gurdwara, one comes upon the Hemkunt lake on the sides on which are built temporary structures where the men change for their *ishnaan*. Facilities for the ladies *ishnaan* are housed inside the gurdwara itself, in the ladies *paona*, where the lake has been ingeniously diverted to form a bathing area.



Conceptual model of the Gurdwara Complex environment.



Model of the proposed Gurdwara

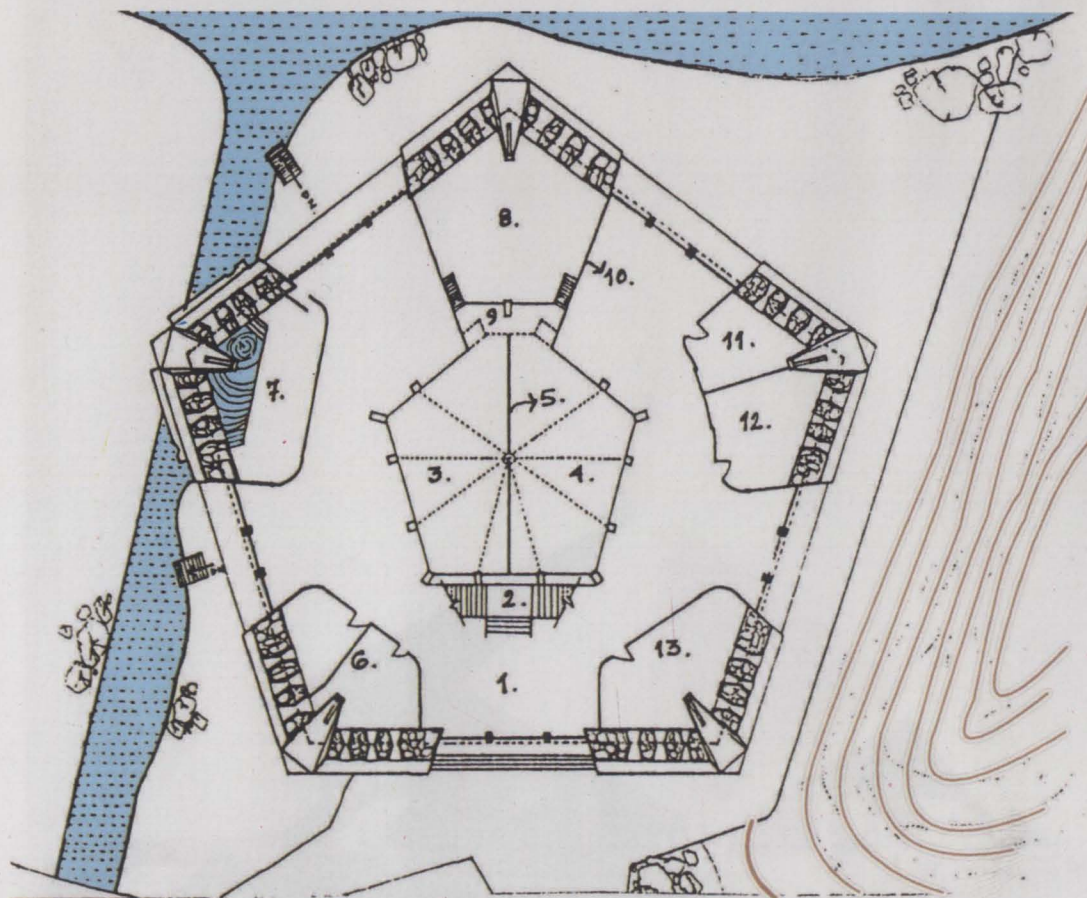


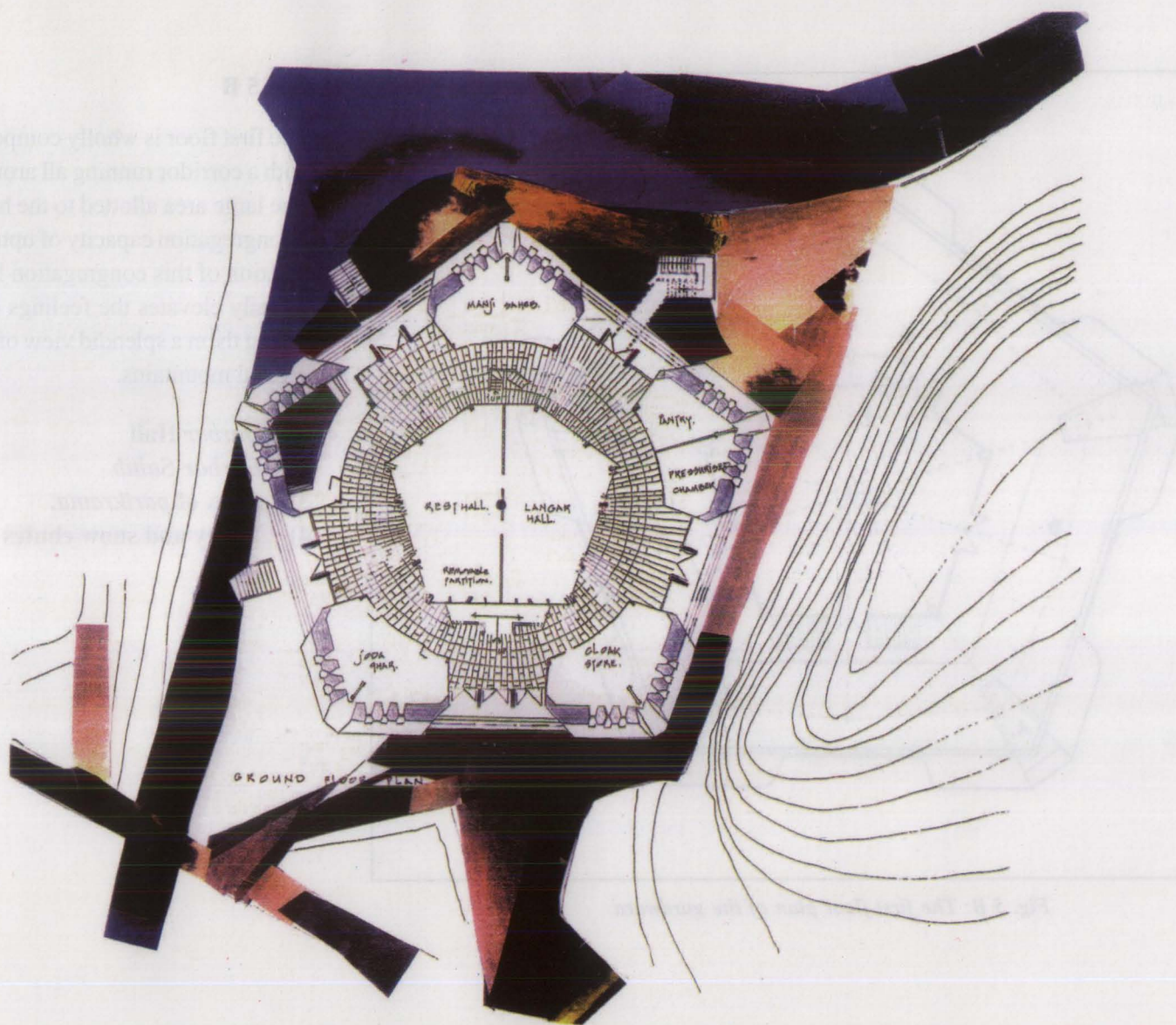
Fig. 5 A : The ground floor plan of the gurdwara.

The Plans

Fig. 5 A :

The ground floor plan of the Hemkunt Sahib Gurdwara was designed so as to accommodate all the requirements and necessities other than the darbar hall for which a larger area would have to be made available.

- 1) Entrance Hall
- 2) Stairs leading up to the *darbar* hall
- 3) Rest Hall
- 4) *Langar* Hall
- 5) Movable partition
- 6) *Joda Ghar* - area to keep shoes
- 7) Ladies's *Paona* - bathing area for the ladies.
- 8) *Manji Sahib* / *Tapshila*
- 9) Stairway leading down to the *Manji Sahib* from the *darbar* hall above.
- 10) Partitions blocking the *Manji Sahib* area :
The idea was to have the pilgrim pay obeisance here after paying their obeisance at the *darbar sahib*. Hence, the access was only from top. After completing the *parikrama* here, the pilgrim would go back upstairs from here itself.
- 11) Pantry
- 12) Pressurised room - An oxygen equipped room for the people who suffer from altitude sickness.
- 13) Cloak Store



Graphic representation of the Ground Floor Plan

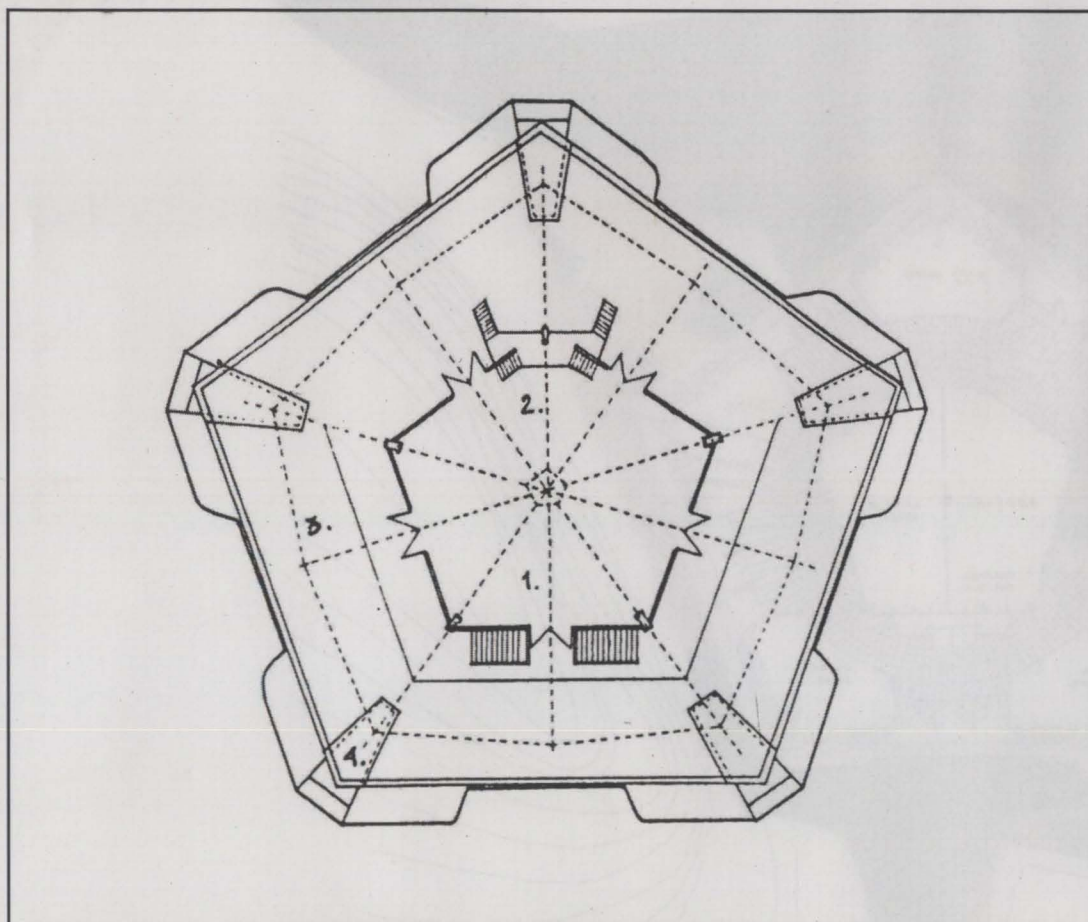
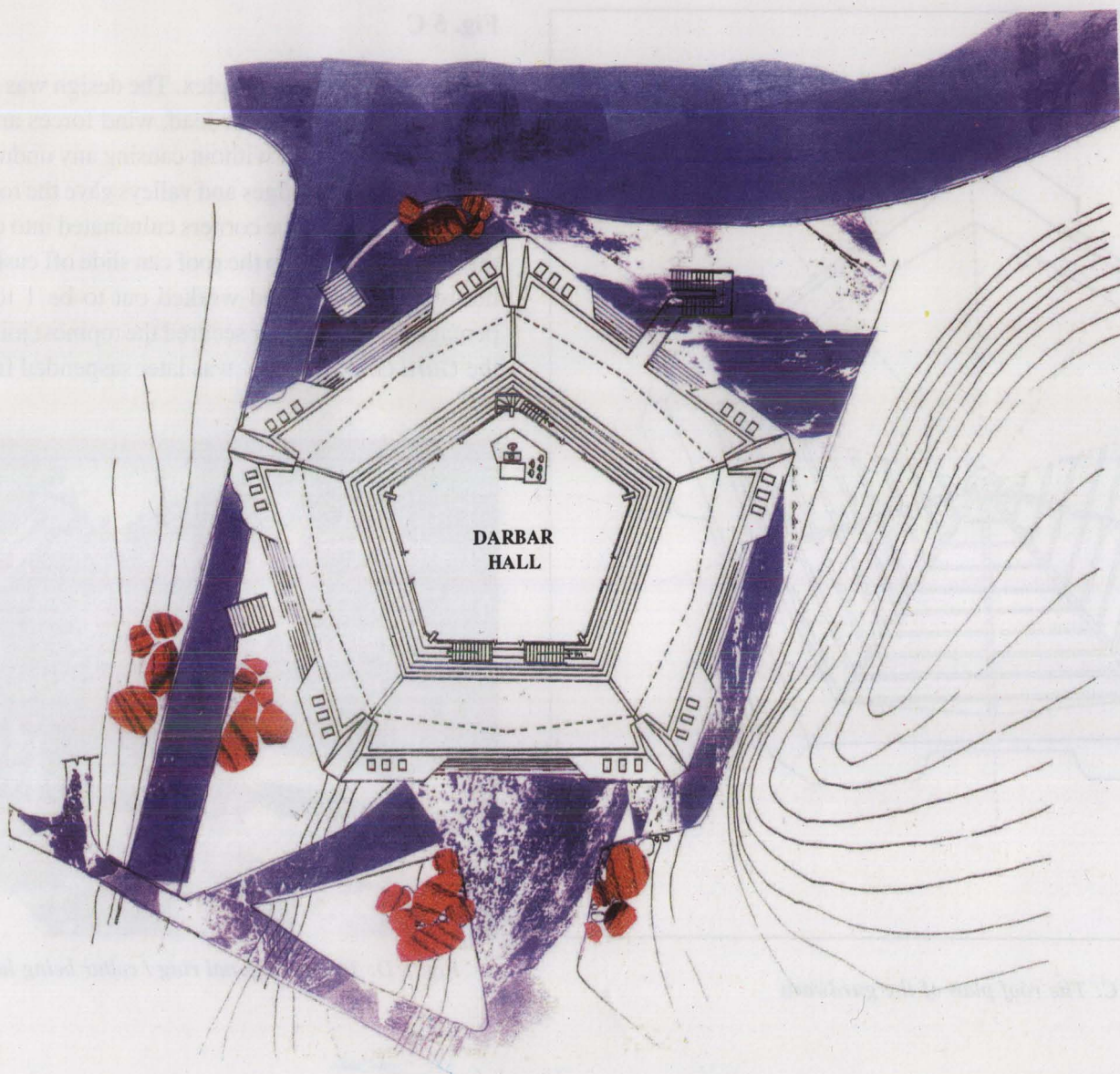


Fig. 5 B: The first floor plan of the gurdwara

Fig. 5 B

The first floor is wholly composed of the *darbar* hall with a corridor running all around for the *parikrama*. The large area allotted to the hall was to accommodate a congregation capacity of upto 400-500 people. The location of this congregation hall on the upper floor literally elevates the feelings of the pilgrim besides giving them a splendid view of the surrounding snow capped mountains.

- 1) *Darbar Hall*
- 2) *Darbar Sahib*
- 3) *Area of parikrama.*
- 4) *Valley and snow chutes*



Graphic representation of the First Floor Plan

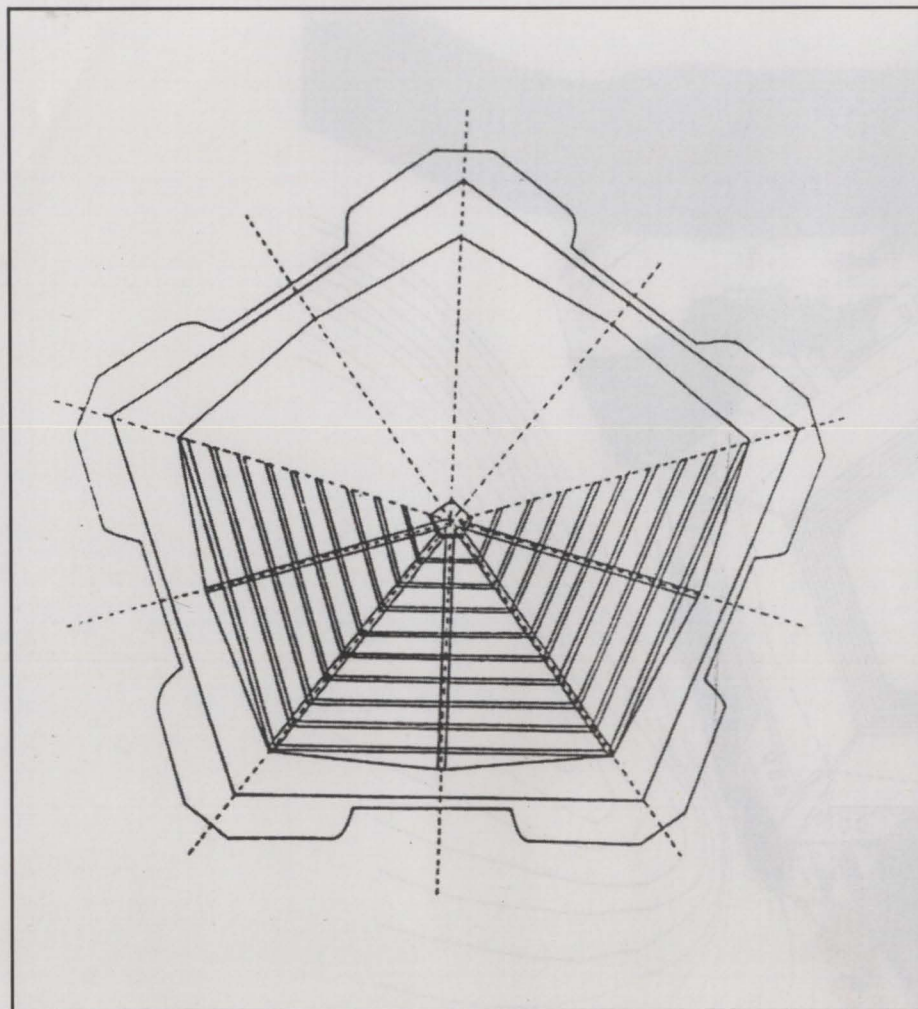


Fig. 5 C: The roof plan of the gurdwara

Fig. 5 C

The roof design was complex. The design was approved after a study was done about the snow load, wind forces and easy facilitation for the snow to slide-off without causing any undue pressure on the roof. A combination of ridges and valleys gave the roof its spectacular look. The valleys at the five corners culminated into chutes so that the snow that accumulates atop the roof can slide off easily. The load for which the roof was designed worked out to be 1 ton per square foot. A pentagonal ring / collar secured the topmost joint. The *chandwa*, over the *Guru Granth Sahib*, was later suspended from the valley beam.

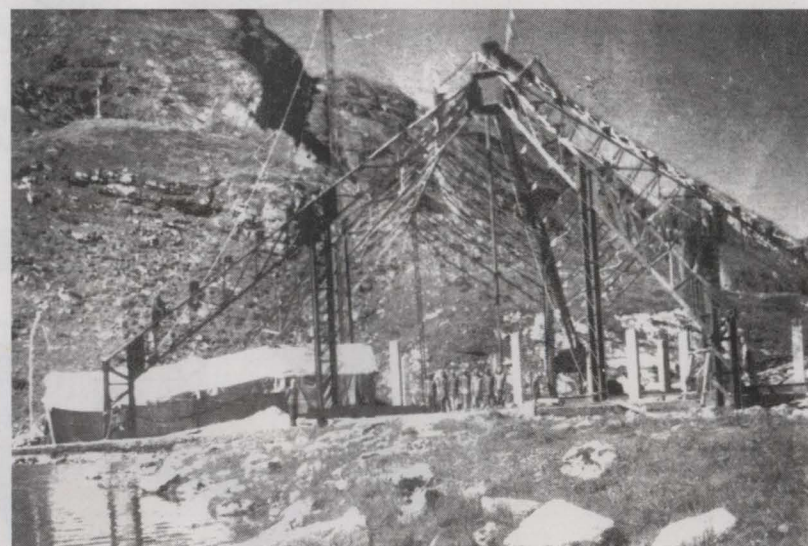
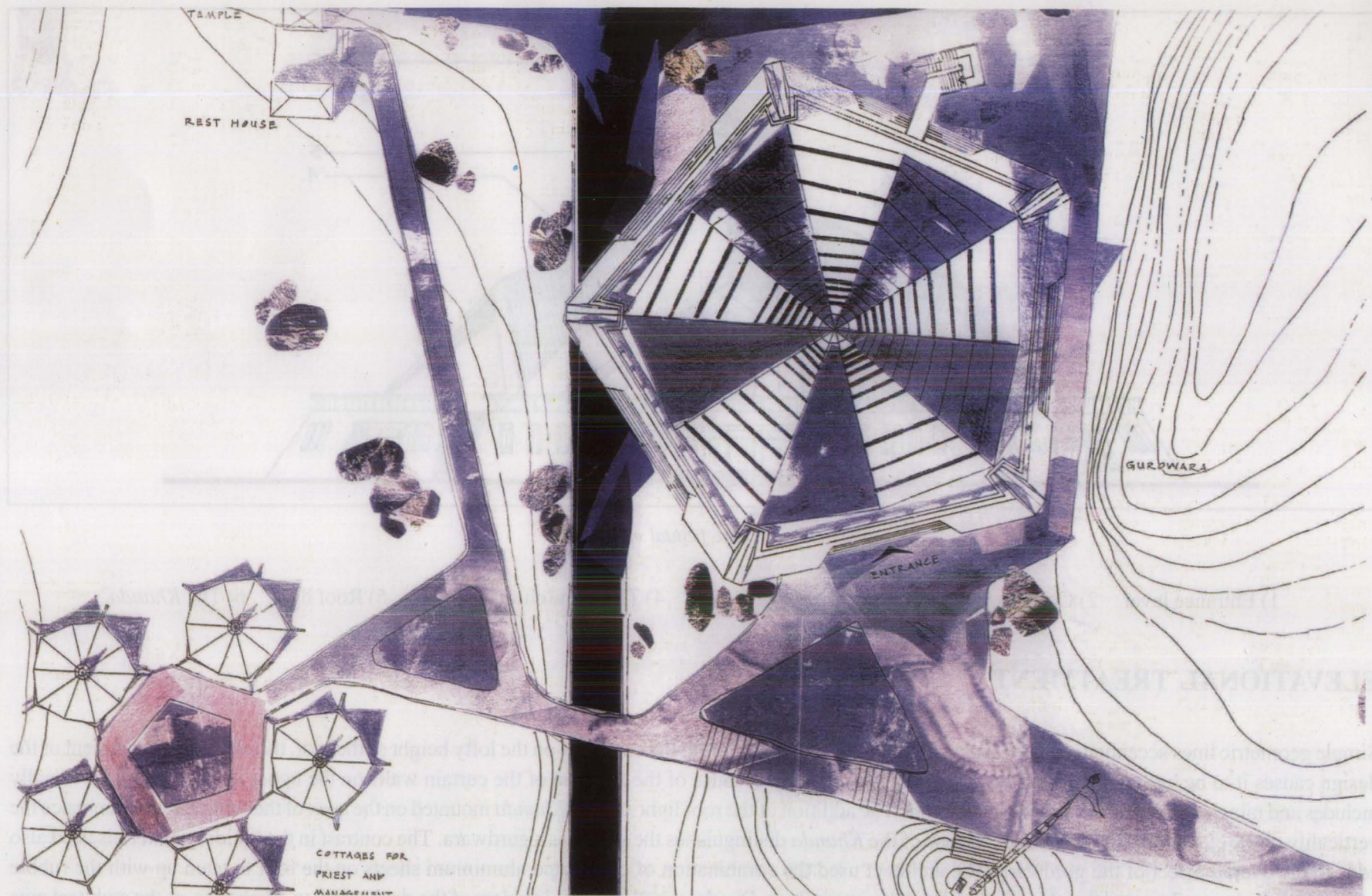


Fig. 5 D: The pentagonal ring / collar being hauled up at the apex



Roof plan of Gurdwara Complex

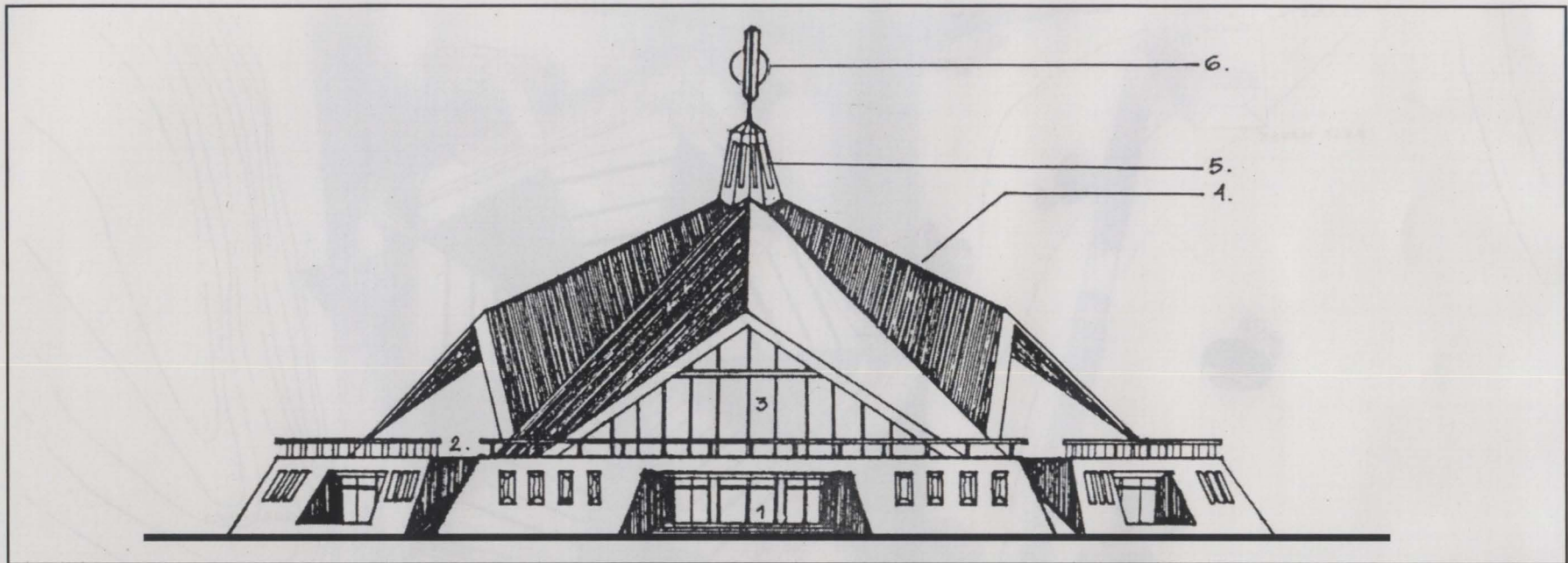
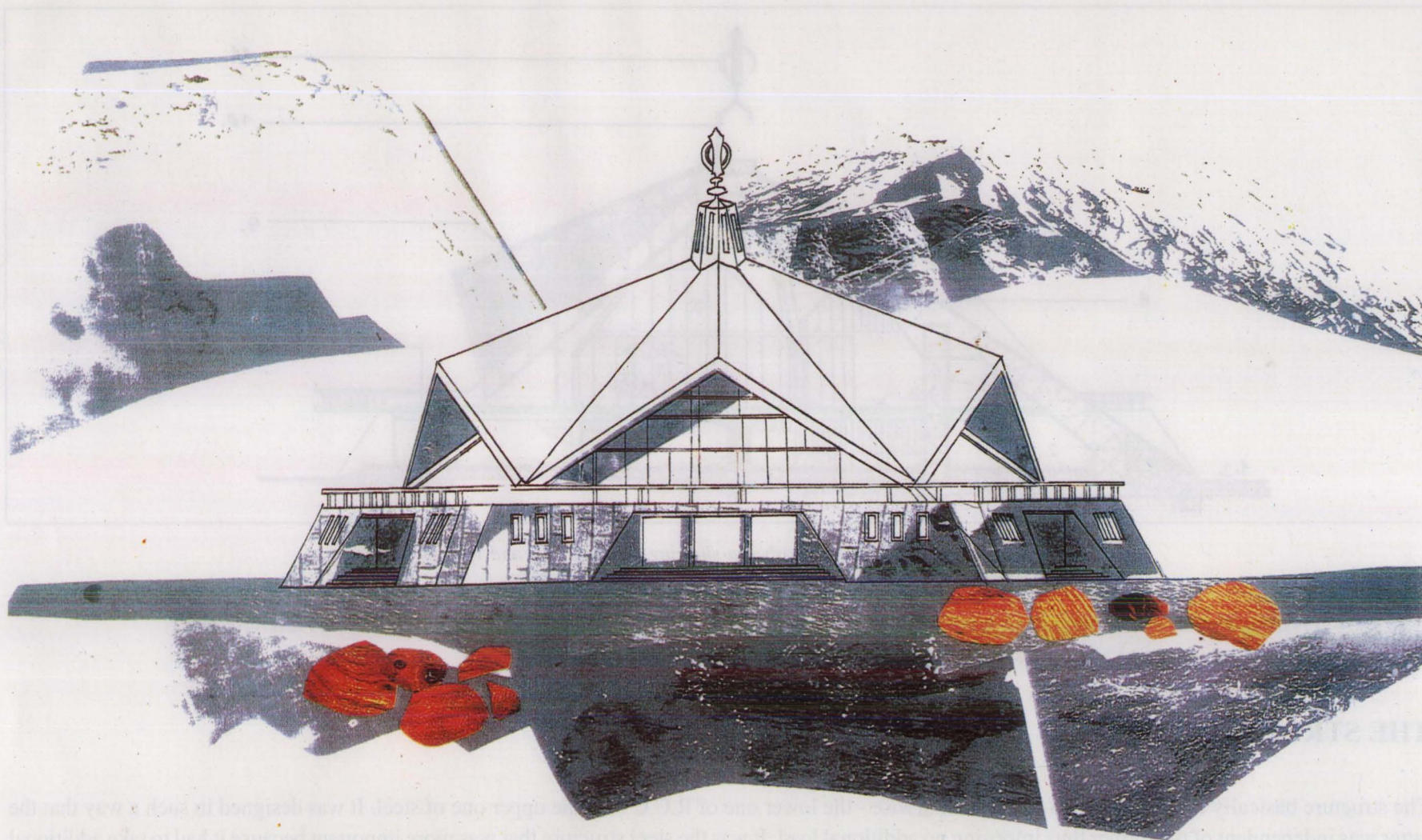


Fig. 6 : The frontal elevation

- 1) Entrance level 2) Corridor for parikrama 3) Curtain walls 4) The aluminium clad roof 5) Roof light 6) The *Khanda*

ELEVATIONAL TREATMENT

Simple geometric lines accentuate the design in the form of its elevation. With the emphasis on the lofty height of the roof, the elevational treatment of the design causes it to be harmonious with its surroundings especially because of the addition of the curtain walls on the upper level. The design visually includes and mingles the exteriors within the interiors. The addition of the roof light and the *Khanda* mounted on the apex of the former, further enhance the verticality of the elevation. Besides which, the use of the *Khanda* distinguishes the shrine as a gurdwara. The contrast in the building materials used also adds to the overall effect of the gurdwara. The architect used the combination of corrugated aluminium sheets on the roof to team up with the rubble masonry of the lower floor and the glass clad walls of the upper floor. *Deodar* wood lines the interiors of the *darbar* hall to emphasise, as the architect puts it - its existence amongst the natural environment.



Graphic representation of the facade of the Gurdwara

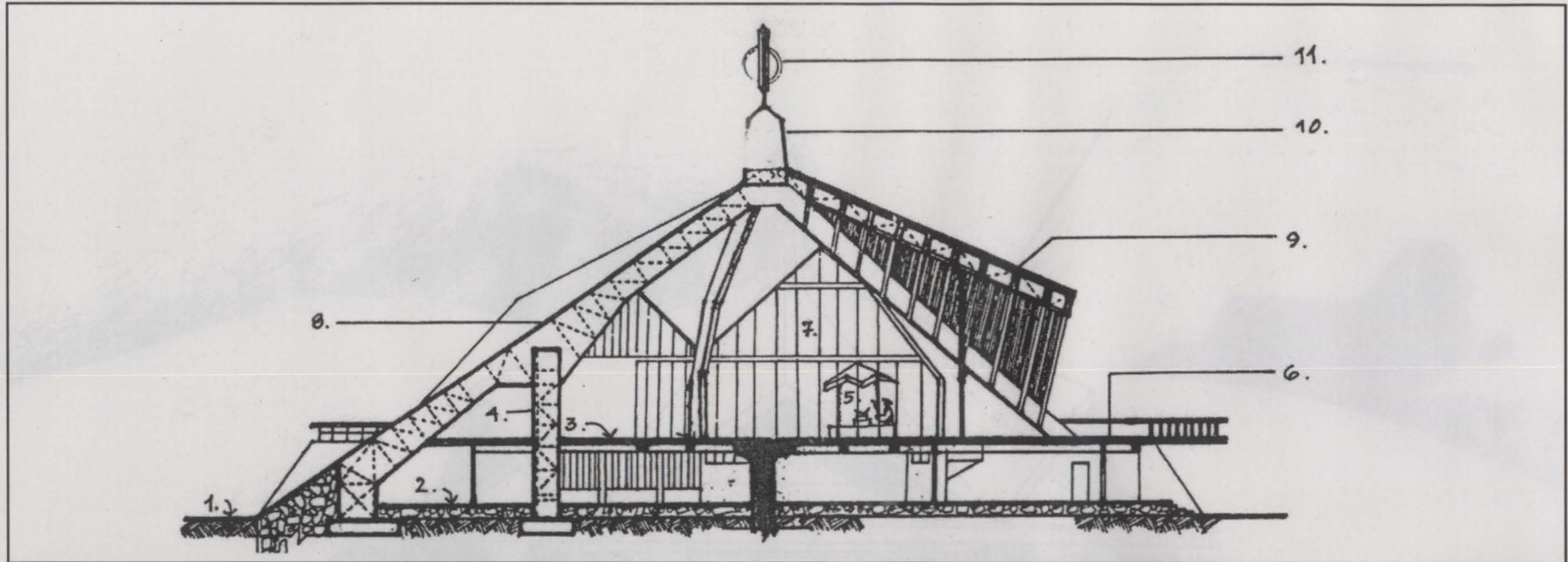


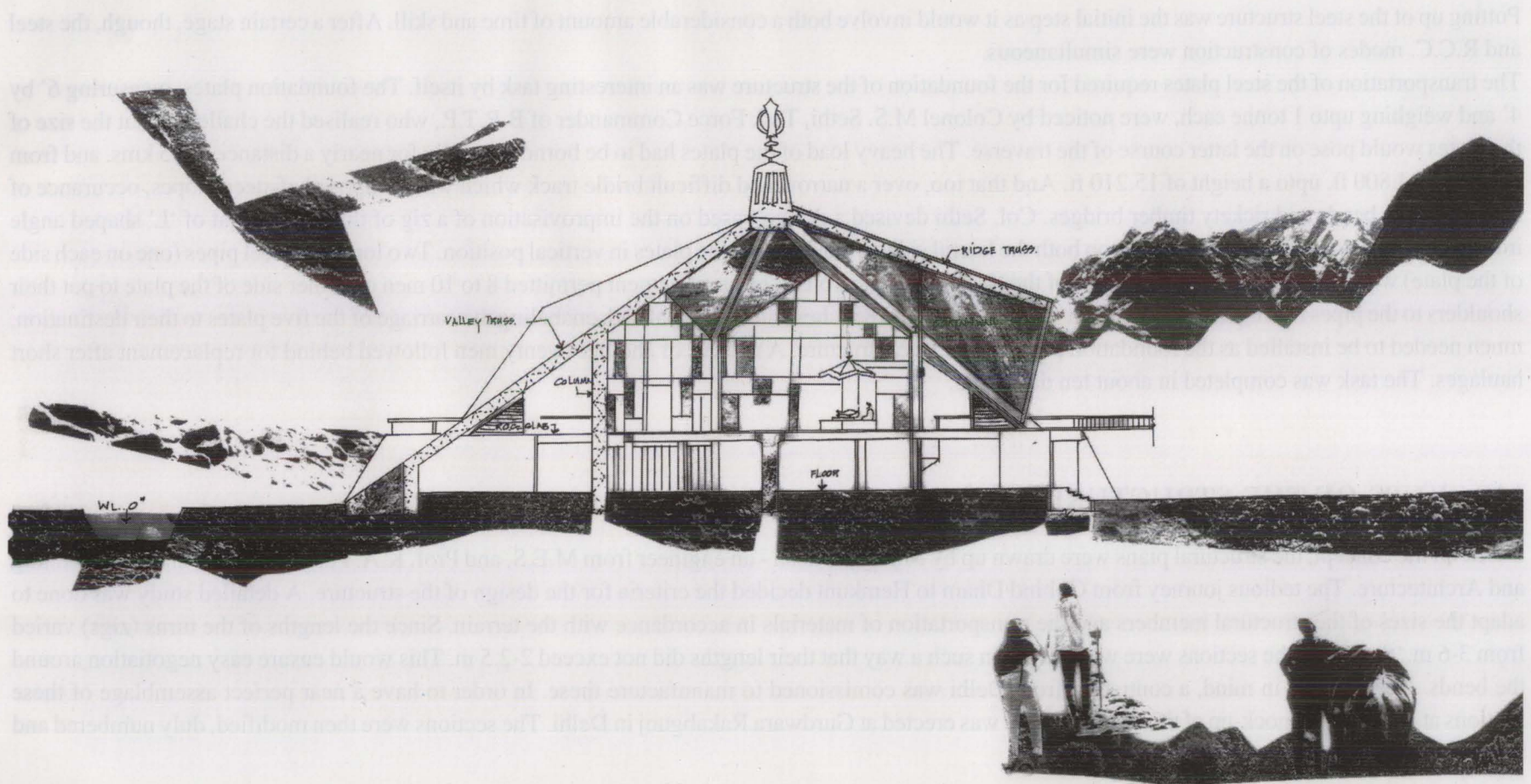
Fig. 7: A sectional view of the gurdwara showing the structure and various spaces.

- | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1) Ground level | 2) Ground floor level | 3) R.C.C. slab | 4) Column | 5) Darbar sahib | 6) Parikrama level |
| 7) Curtain wall | 8) Valley truss | | 9) Ridge truss | 10) Roof light | 11) Khanda |

THE STRUCTURE

The structure basically consisted of two sections floorwise - the lower one of R.C.C. and the upper one of steel. It was designed in such a way that the latter was independent of the former thus imposing no additional load. It was the steel structure that was more important because it had to take additional pressure and impact of the snow load and the avalanches. But the lower floor too had to brave the seismic forces, hence the foundation along with the columns were bound with R.C.C. beams all around and additional diagonal bracings were used to secure the foundation, the plinth and the roof. The external wall of ground floor were kept tapered not only to mitigate the form of the hills around but also to withstand the seismic forces. The roof was also strengthened with the help of ties along with the pentagonal ring that bound them all in place - as **one** piece homogeneously.

SEQUENCE OF CONSTRUCTION



Graphic representation of Sectional Elevation

SEQUENCE OF CONSTRUCTION

Putting up of the steel structure was the initial step as it would involve both a considerable amount of time and skill. After a certain stage, though, the steel and R.C.C. modes of construction were simultaneous.

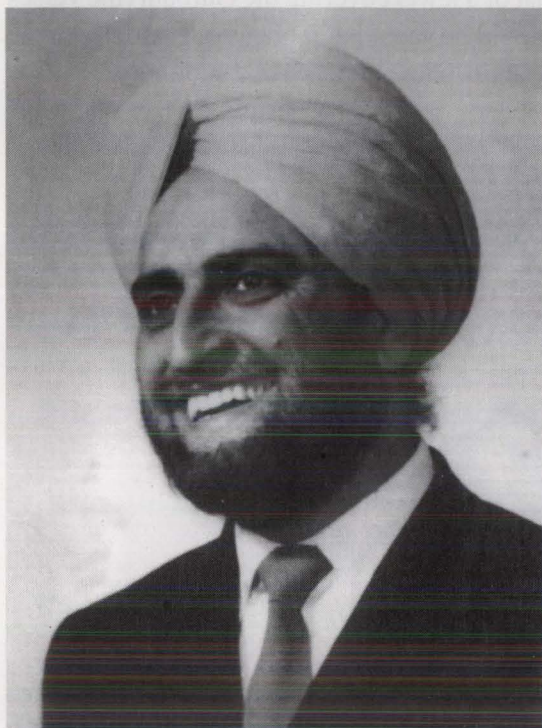
The transportation of the steel plates required for the foundation of the structure was an interesting task by itself. The foundation plates, measuring 6' by 4' and weighing upto 1 tonne each, were noticed by Colonel M.S. Sethi, Task Force Commander of B.R.T.P., who realised the challenge that the size of the plates would pose on the latter course of the traverse. The heavy load of the plates had to be borne manually for nearly a distance of 15 kms. and from a height of 4,800 ft. upto a height of 15,210 ft. And that too, over a narrow and difficult bridle track which was composed of steep slopes, occurrence of steps, hair pin bends and rickety timber bridges. Col. Sethi devised a design based on the improvisation of a zig of the bends - that of 'L' shaped angle irons which were to be bolted to the plates on both the lateral sides while keeping the plates in vertical position. Two long G.I. steel pipes (one on each side of the plate) were tied to the extended portion of the 'L' of the angle irons. This arrangement permitted 8 to 10 men on either side of the plate to put their shoulders to the pipes raising the plate from the ground by about 18 inches and moving ahead, enabling the carriage of the five plates to their destination, much needed to be installed as the foundation plates to the steel structure. A reserve of another twenty men followed behind for replacement after short haulages. The task was completed in about ten days time.

MOCKUPS OF THE STRUCTURE

Based on the concept, the structural plans were drawn up by Mr. C.P. Ghosh - an engineer from M.E.S. and Prof. K.A. Patel from the School of Planning and Architecture. The tedious journey from Gobind Dham to Hemkunt decided the criteria for the design of the structure. A detailed study was done to adapt the sizes of the structural members and the transportation of materials in accordance with the terrain. Since the lengths of the turns (zigs) varied from 3-6 m., therefore, the sections were worked out in such a way that their lengths did not exceed 2-2.5 m. This would ensure easy negotiation around the bends. Keeping this in mind, a contractor from Delhi was commissioned to manufacture these. In order to have a near perfect assemblage of these sections at Hemkunt, a mock-up of the steel structure was erected at Gurdwara Rakabgunj in Delhi. The sections were then modified, duly numbered and then taken to Hemkunt.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PROJECT

5



The Architect - S. Manmohan Singh Siali

The contributions of some revolutionary men made the project of Hemkunt Gurdwara come alive. It was through their steering efforts, amongst others, that allowed the translations of the project from mind to paper and thereafter... to the site itself.

An interview with the Architect

Q. Could we have some information about your background before you initiated this project ?

A. After having graduated in Architecture from the Department of Architecture, Delhi Polytechnic (now the School of Planning and Architecture) in 1951, I joined the Punjab Capital Project which was being headed by Monseir Le Corbusier. This project involved the planning and development of Chandigarh. After extensive experience and awarness in the process of planning. I went to England to do Post-Graduation in Urban Design from the University of Durham at King's College, New Castle Upon Tyne. After working in the U.K. for a year, I returned to India and was involved with the planning of Barauni Refinery in Bihar (in 1959) and thereafter with an Antibiotics project of I.D.P.L. at Rishikesh, U.P. Soon the Chinese conflict developed and this led to a decreasing trend in construction activities and it was during this time that to my good fortune I came across General Harkirat Singh, who inspired me to join the Military Engineering Services (M.E.S.) At that time, Maj. Gen. Harkirat Singh was an Engineer- in-Chief of the Indian Army. Hence, through the U.P.S.C. exam, I joined the Ministry of Defence as a Senior Architect in the year 1964.

Q. While you were working for the Antibiotics project in Rishikesh, you were in close contact with a Hemkunt Trustee member - Sardar Gurbaksh Singh. Why did you not think of planning a gurdwara at Hemkunt at that time?

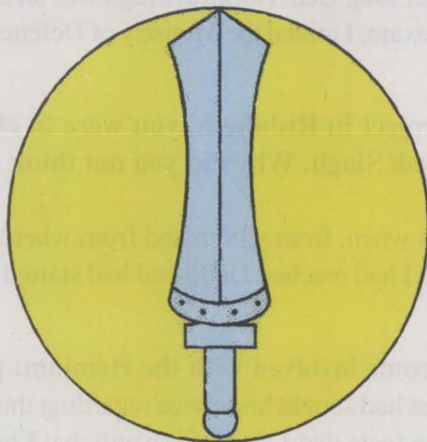
A. It is a story of *mukaddar* (fate). It is He who knows when, from whom and from where He is to get sewa (service). And that is why I was chosen only after I had reached Delhi and had started working for the Military Engineering Services.

Q. But being a part of the M.E.S., how did you become involved with the Hemkunt project ?

A. At the time of joining the M.E.S., Gen. Harkirat Singh was the Engineer -in -Chief. The Hemkunt Trust had sought his advice regarding this project and **he was instrumental in suggesting its design and scope with respect to the future.** Considering the facts that I was a Sikh and that I had extensive experience in various projects, he immediately informed me about the project of Hemkunt Gurdwara which required an area for a congregation of 400-500 people. Since I was in the Ministry of Defence, I needed official permission to take on an honorary assignment. On being requested by the Hemkunt Trust, the permission was duly granted and I was able to start work on it.



The architect's translation of the roof form as the jewel covering the Gurbani



Khanda (Double edged sword)

Q. Given the unusual location of the project, how did you go about conceptualising the design.?

A. My first visualisation of the design was that of a jewel covering the Gurbani (the verses of the Almighty). The place of meditation should be such that it opens out visually to the surrounding mountainscape lending the holy atmosphere of peace and sublimity.



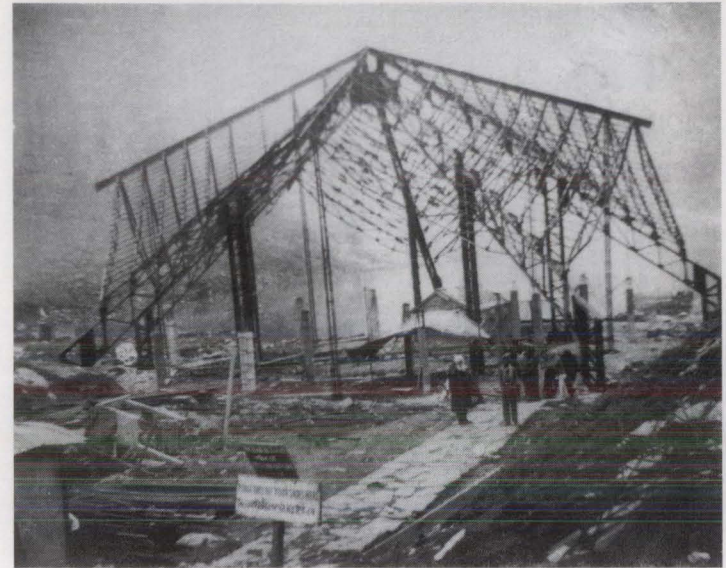
Bejewelled Kirpans

Q. It is obvious that the terrain and the climate were principal factors, but a gurdwara after all is a manifestation of the Sikh religion - so how did you manage to convey the religious aspect of it inspite of the overwhelming factors?

A. The Hemkunt Gurdwara is an example that goes out to show how taking the middle path can lead to a successful and viable solution. Although, the architecture of Hemkunt Sahib does not conform to that of a typical Gurdwara, it manages to relate to the religion through its unique form - that of a pentagon - only unique in its kind in the whole world. The number '5' has immense significance in Sikh religion. The followers adhere to the rule of wearing **five** symbols which would distinguish them as Sikhs. It is further reiterated by the *panj piaras* and the five *takhts*. So as you see, the religious aspect has automatically been woven along with the dictates of the environment.

Q. Given the location of the site, its inaccessibility and the unpredictable weather, the construction must have posed a daunting task. When did the construction commence and which phase of the construction proved to be really crucial ?

A. The construction started in July 1968. Actually, if you calculate the actual time-frame of the construction, you will find that **it takes around four years to complete one year of construction** because only three months in a year are workable. Also the high altitude affected not only the working capacity of the labour force but also that of the machines owing to the lack of oxygen. The working capacity reduced down to as much as 40% as compared to the plains. There were times when the biting cold numbed the fingers of the workers while they worked at the pinnacle of the roof at a level of 10m. Undeterred, they still worked on. Quick setting cement, usage of warm water for curing were some of the options put into practice to induce quick results



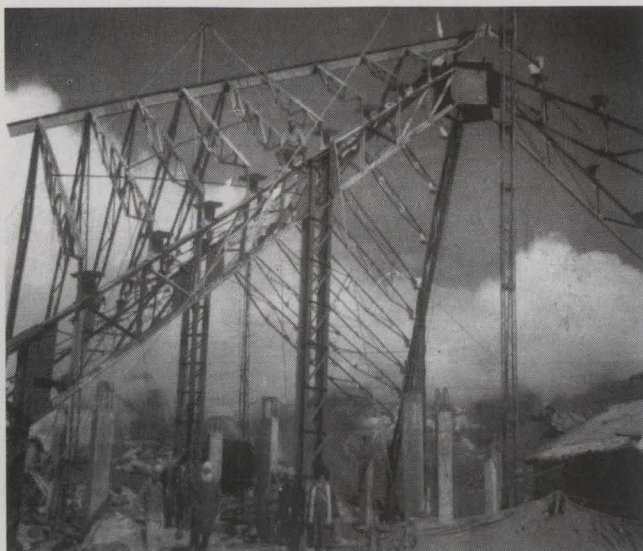
Erection of steel structure at Hemkunt



S. Sahib Singh, second from left, at Hemkunt

The phase of the erection of the steel structures was the most crucial and it proved to be so. This was because the entire structure was dependent on it and in an area prone to earthquakes and avalanches proper erection of the framing structure is THE factor! To ensure further strength and soundness of the structure, high tensile bolts and nuts were used and the joints were welded to avoid water seepage. The freezing temperatures made this job extremely difficult because, as I mentioned earlier, it numbed the fingers of the workers. But I am filled with pride when I say that inspite of all this, the work was done to perfection as can be proved from the incident of the earthquake.

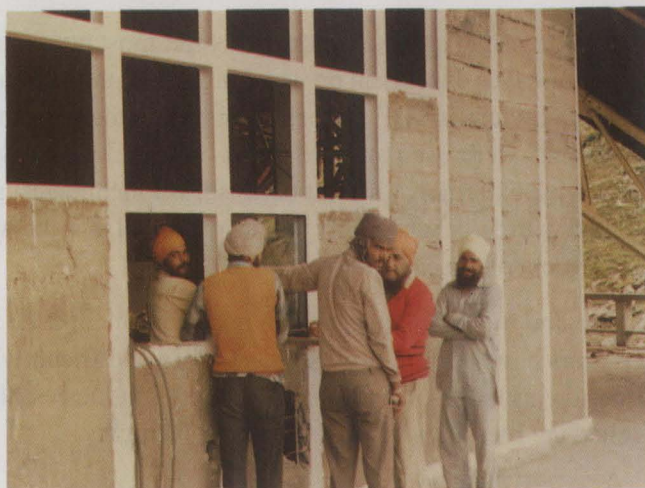
The vagaries of nature and the undulating terrain pose a problem even today. The virtually non-existent pathways of yester-years have been improved but still prove difficult when transportation of materials is done. If you ask me, then inspite of all these plagueing hindrances, this herculean task could only be fulfilled because it had the blessings of *Waheguru* (the Almighty).



Steel Trusses being raised over valley beam in 1972



Boarding of Astrolite being laid over Steel Trusses in 1974



Glazing is being placed in position under supervision of Architect

Q. Which features of the building would you list as unique ?

A. Its location, the mighty **Himalayas**, itself is a unique point. People find it astonishing that a Gurdwara can exist at this height and are overwhelmed at its sight. The highlight of this building is that it is only one of its kind. A religious centre where a congregation of 400-500 people can be held at a height of 15210 ft. above the sea level. The gurdwara's five sided form; with its four sides representing the four directions and the fifth side representing space, makes it perhaps **the only pentagonal gurdwara in the world**. Its unusual roof form also distinguishes it from typical gurdwara architecture. Some innovative things have been done within the interiors like diversion of the *sarovar* into the gurdwara itself to create a women *paona* (bathing area) so that they can take their dip in privacy. The skylight or lantern that forms the apex of the roof has been designed in such a way that the incoming rays light up the *Guru Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs regarded as their Supreme Guru). The *chandwa* (umbrella shaped canopy placed atop the Guru Granth Sahib) has also been suspended from the roof unlike at other gurdwaras.



The exotic blossoms seen at the Valley of Flowers

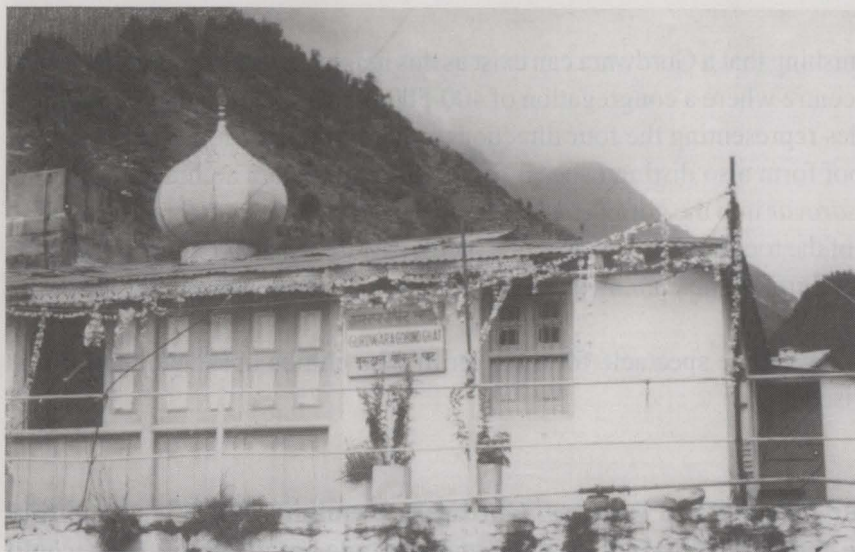
On the whole, it creates an awesome spectacle for the pilgrim who climbs upto that altitude and beholds the breathtaking visual!

Q. Considering its unique location and features, Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib is a beautiful example of faith, courage and determination - not too many people are aware of. How would you publicise it ?

A. There has never been any organised publicity about Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib. But since an overwhelming number of pilgrims visit this place, they have spread its account by word of mouth. Photographs, video coverages of the trek taken by enthusiastic pilgrims also abound. Books describing the place and their experiences have also been written by devotees. It is not just Sikhs who visit Gurdwara Hemkunt, but many others. People who visit Badrinath are also drawn to this place because of what they hear from local people. Trekkers visiting the Valley of Flowers, which is in proximity to the Gurdwara, are also attracted to the gurdwara as they meet several pilgrims on the same route who tell them stories about the place. Now, this book will bring out the facts about the dedicated efforts of the persons behind its concept, design and realisation. This itself will be enough to bring people to this God's created place for solace and to appreciate the wonder of nature.

Q. How has the construction been funded and how much has the project cost till date ?

A. The Sikh devotees possess hearts that are generous and giving. Therefore, the funding has and still is being supported by them. Sikhs from all over the world contribute and are selfless in their offerings. Till date, the construction has cost about over a crore and a half and needs an additional two crore to complete its construction.



Gurdwara Gobind Ghat



Gurdwara Rishikesh



Gurdwara Gobind Dham

Q. Have you also been involved with other architectural projects of the Trust ?

A. I have been and still am actively involved with the various construction works which include Gurdwara Rishikesh, Gurdwara Hardwar, the extension of Gurdwara Srinagar, Gurdwara Joshimath and gurdwaras at Gobind Ghat and Gobind Dham and various facilities like rest-houses etc. for all these transit stops enroute to Hemkunt.



Major General Harkirat Singh

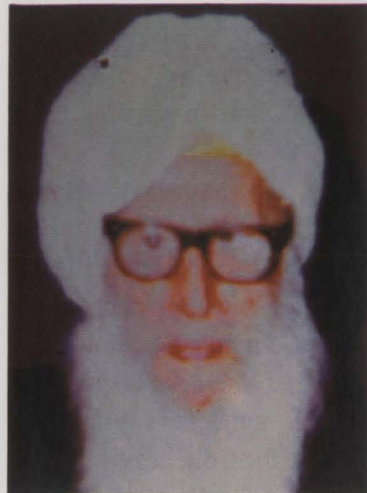
Major General Harkirat Singh

A man of rare vision, the late Major General Harkirat Singh had made remarkable contributions in diverse fields. His contributions made him renowned not only in the Defence organisation but also in various civil organisations.

In the year 1933, Gen. Harkirat Singh was granted the King's Commission in Madras Sappers from the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich U.K. After having served at various parts of the world and India and after the Second World War, he was appointed as the Chief Engineer of the Southern Command in 1947. Subsequently, he served as the Chief Engineer of the Western Command (in 1950) and yet again as the Chief Engineer of the Southern Command. In between, he successfully commanded an Infantry Brigade, thus distinguishing himself as an outstanding engineer and an eminent soldier. During his three tenures as Command Chief Engineer, he played a leading role in the post-War reorganisation of the Corps of Engineers and execution of a large number of construction projects for the Army, Navy and Air-Force. Later, he was appointed as the Commander of the College of Military Engineering and was one of the main pillars in the growth of this premier institution of the Corps. Being an outstanding engineer, he was elected President of the Institute of Engineers (India) for two consecutive terms. Later, he was bestowed with the honorary membership of the Institute. **Of all his outstanding achievements, perhaps the most crucial was his compilation of the very first National Building Code which covered the entire gamut of administrative, financial, construction and technical aspects.** The monumental publication was his personal handiwork and has been adopted by major construction departments of the Central and State Governments.

In recognition of his crusading zeal and valuable contributions in the field of standardisation, **the General was awarded the Moudgil Prize in 1970.** Like a true General, he could assess who would be the right person for any job and likewise, he selected a team of competent people to design and execute the project for the Hemkunt Trust. Whenever the Trust was in need of his guidance he would always come to their rescue by helping them out on technical matters and advising them on the necessary personnel.

As mentioned before, the General was a man of rare vision and had influenced the developing society of the country by his valuable contributions through various organisations. A man, who made sure he completed what he began with dedication, Gen. Harkirat Singh gave his best to both public and private sectors. He was a man for all seasons-always enthusiastic, ever encouraging and endearing himself to all and sundry through his large hearted virtues. The General was a person who epitomised the saying of 'living life to the fullest'. A remarkable man with a varied spectrum of talents and achievements, he was undoubtedly one of the tallest figures of the Corps of Engineers.



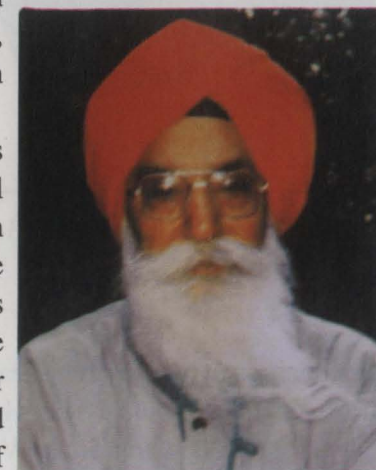
S. Sahib Singh

S. Sahib Singh
and
S. Gursharan Singh

Sardar Sahib Singh and his nephew Gursharan Singh can both be credited for the construction of gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib. One of the partners in the Messrs. Sahib Singh, Harbhajan Singh & Gursharan Singh, the former was in his late seventies when he offered his firm's services for the building of the gurdwara. Born at Nankana Sahib, Pakistan in 1898, Sahib Singh graduated from Punjab University in Lahore. Although S. Sahib Singh was aged, he displayed a positive attitude of exuberance and zeal. He was joined in his efforts by his nephew, Gursharan Singh, who was a civil engineer having graduated from Punjab Engineering College, Chandigarh. Their combined knowledge shaped the unique structure of the gurdwara in the given formidable surroundings.

With his vast experience in construction, Sahib Singh systematically mobilised his resources and prepared a plan of action for the building activities due to occur. He selected a staff of qualified personnel from his organisation to visit the site in 1968. Though the construction began at a slow pace, the restraints were soon overcome and activities speeded up. His experience as a builder enabled him to establish a very good rapport with the architect. Sahib Singh who was good at understanding the intricacy of all the various details and would discuss problems that would likely to occur before venturing out to the site so that the schedule of construction activities would be unhampered. Amongst the two modes of construction of R.C.C. and steel, the complex steel structure was put up under his guidance. Gursharan Singh displayed his competency as a civil engineer by organising the execution of the complicated form of the roof as well as the layout and foundation of the structure. The earlier suggestion of lean concrete as the roof material was turned down keeping in mind the climatic & environmental conditions. Corrugated aluminium sheets were then chosen as the most apt material to roof the structure.

The long standing dedication of Sahib Singh made the first Hemkunt trustee members confer upon him the membership of the Trust after one of them had expired. He tirelessly and devotedly served the construction and developmental activities of the Trust. Besides looking after the building activities of the Trust, he started collecting rations from the Sikh *sangat* (of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab) who were keen to make their contributions to the *langar* that would be for the consumption of the visiting yatis. The amount of rations collected by him far exceeded the amount that was required even for a year. He expired at the age of 98 years.



S. Gursharan Singh

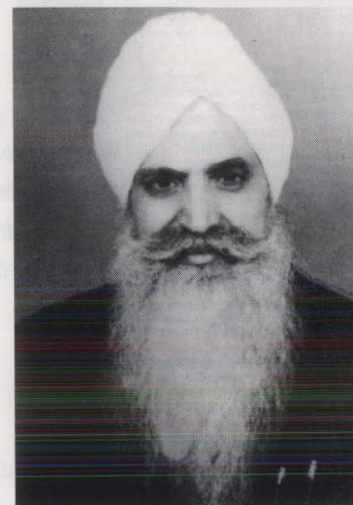
Dr. S. Inderjit Singh
(1911-1998)

“The devotee has finally succeeded in his mission! In life he served **Him**- In death he remembered **Him**”

A legend of his time, Dr. Inderjit Singh was referred to as an outstanding banker, philanthropist, educationist and above all- a selfless human being. Born and brought up in a devoted Hindu family, he was an eminent scholar and social worker. Throughout his lifetime, he served the cause of Sikh faith and nation at large. His father was a highly respected personality and had full faith in the teachings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

S. Inderjit Singh's life had been an example of truth and truthful living. He served selfless and performed conscientiously in all spheres of his life. He lived in simplicity and humility and was straight forward and clear in his dealings. He excelled in the virtues of honesty, devotion and optimism. A renowned humanitarian, he drew inspiration from the spiritual teachings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Dr. Inderjit Singh was the Chairman of the Punjab & Sind Bank and later, the promoter of the Bank of Punjab. He led the Punjab & Sind Bank from a mere few branches to a staggering figure of 100 branches and with a budget of 1000 crores, which indeed can be claimed as a miracle. He was known to be a great banker and a financial wizard. Dr. Inderjit Singh was a great admirer of the Gursikh way of life and its history and he projected this through the media of calendars and pamphlets. He was the president of Gurdwara Hemkunt Management Trust from 1997-1998 and had wisely managed the financial matters of the Trust.



Dr. S. Inderjit Singh

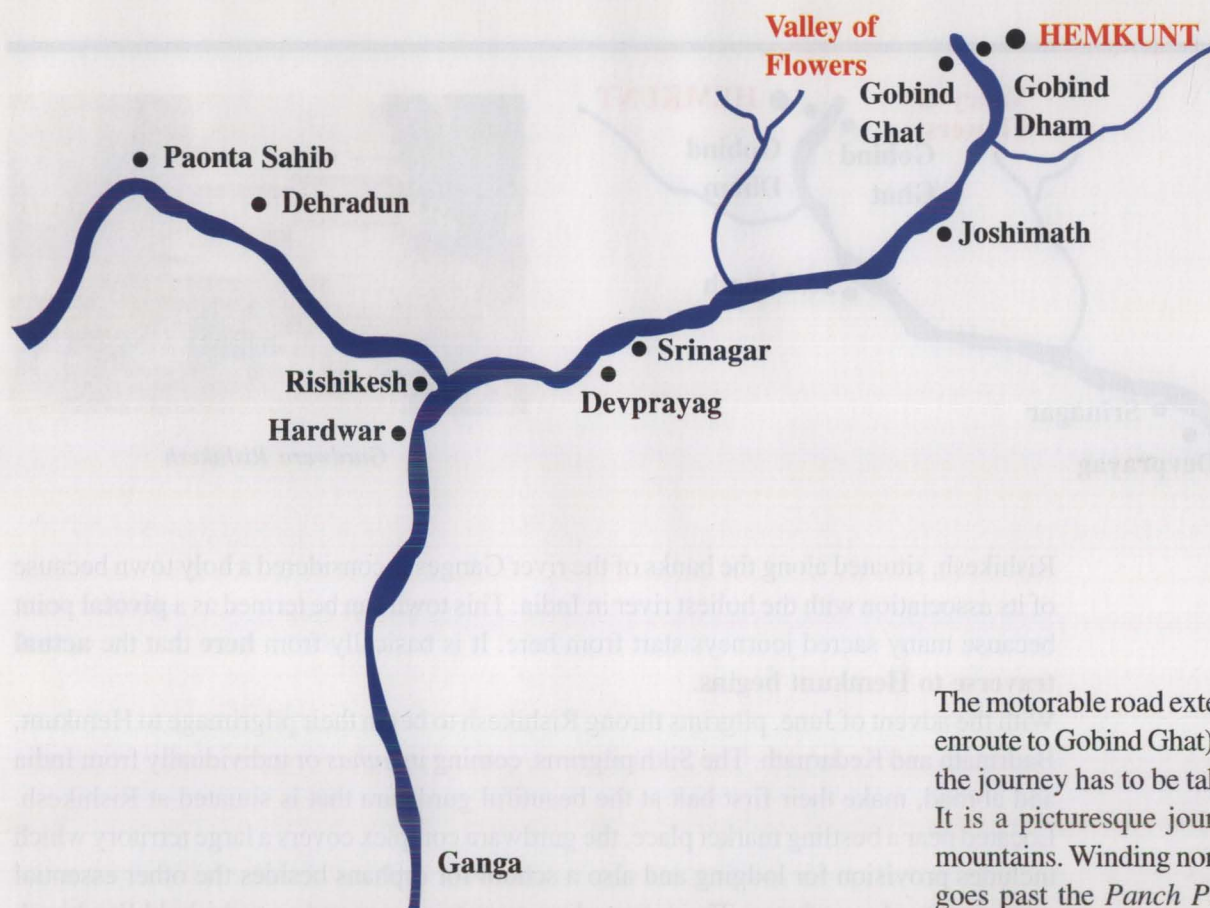
'There is a place known as Hemkunt Sapt String. Of the many rocky peaks of the earth, seven are distinctive. Impressive in appearance, they rise gracefully from amidst the snows like silver spires above the forest..... Among these snow laden, peaks, in a depression at their base, is a pond of water. Behold! by the power of the Almighty, the lake is not frozen even here... in the abode of snow. A small stream emerges from it and then flows for several miles until it meets the Alaknanda below.'

Bhai Veer Singh, Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkar

The northern region of the state of Uttar Pradesh is washed by the pious waters of the holiest of rivers, the Ganges. It is here that one can find pilgrimage centres in abundance primarily owing to their proximity to this holy river. But amongst these, lies a unique pious spot, nestled high up in the lap of the lofty Himalayas. It is a pilgrimage centre that can boast of being **both a wonder of nature as well as a marvel of architecture**. As described in the words above, there lies here a lake by the name of Hemkunt which is surrounded by seven peaks. On the bank of this lake exists a gurdwara, that marks the *tapasthan* of *Dusht Daman* which is known as **Gurdwara Sri Hemkunt Sahib**.

Located at a height of 15,210 ft. above sea level, Gurdwara Hemkunt is the only gurdwara of its kind built at such a high attitude. Throughout the months of October to June, the region is engulfed under snow and is practically inaccessible but with the oncoming season of summer, the snow melts to reveal a mountain side teeming with activity. With the advent of June begins the endless line of pilgrims and tourists journeying to visit the gurdwara. Drawn to the place because of its piety and beauty, people brave the hard weather conditions and tread the steep paths amongst the mountains. Pilgrims from within the country and from abroad come in vast numbers to bathe in the holy waters of the lake. Such is the effect on the pilgrims that many make it an annual pilgrimage and visit the gurdwara every year. The natural beauty and the presence of the exotic Valley of Flowers adds to the attraction and draws many a trekker.

The sheer difficulty of the traverse, the grit and the enthusiastic spirit of the people forms a combination that never flags. The actual traverse begins from Rishikesh and then builds its way upwards to Gobind Ghat, Gobind Dham and to the final destination..... **HEMKUNT!** The road and the river both meander their way through the mountains, teasing and challenging each other, sometimes one rising above the other. The might of the mountains is reflected all around. The vagaries of nature seen in the unpredictable weather and the landslides do cause hinderances to the pilgrims, sometimes causing them to halt in their vehicles for hours till the roads can be cleared of debris. But the spirits never lower and stay aloft amidst the chants of kirtans. The pilgrims who complete their journeys encourage the morale of the ones who are on their way up with the words '*Waheguruji ka Khalsa, Waheguruji ki fateh!*' - a line that joins everyone together.



A view of mountain scape

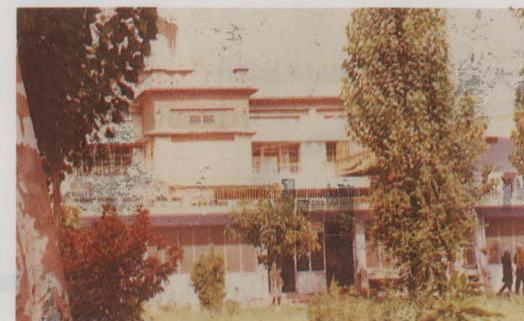
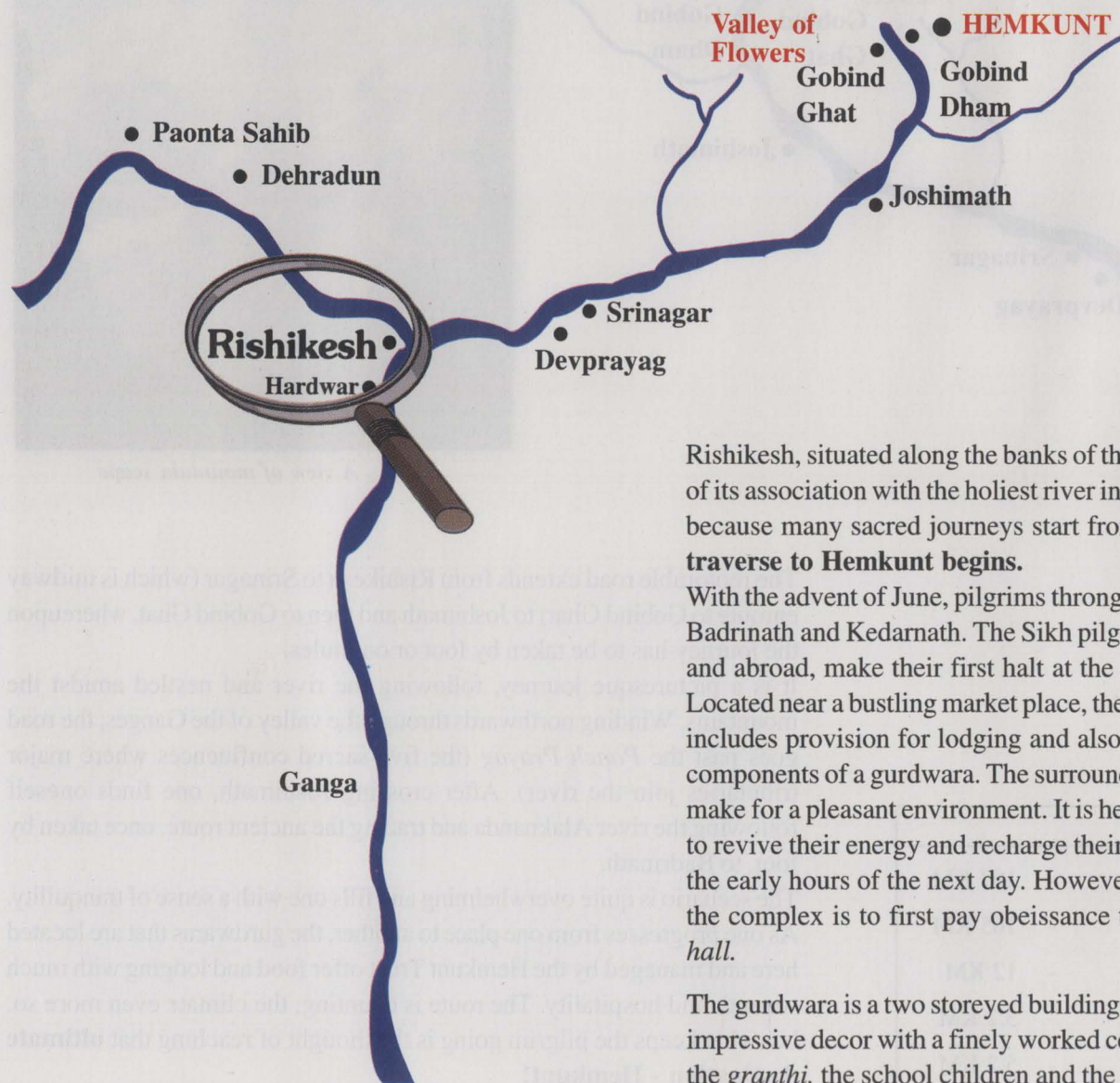
DISTANCE IN KM	
RISHIKESH TO SRINAGAR	- 107 KM
SRINAGAR TO GOBIND GHAT	- 165 KM
GOBIND GHAT TO GOBIND DHAM	- 12 KM
GOBIND DHAM TO VALLEY OF FLOWER	- 3.2 KM
GOBIND DHAM TO SRI HEMKUNT	- 5.2 KM

The motorable road extends from Rishikesh to Srinagar (which is midway enroute to Gobind Ghat) to Joshimath and then to Gobind Ghat, whereupon the journey has to be taken by foot or on mules.

It is a picturesque journey, following the river and nestled amidst the mountains. Winding northwards through the valley of the Ganges, the road goes past the *Panch Prayag* (the five sacred confluences where major tributaries join the river). After crossing Joshimath, one finds oneself following the river Alaknanda and tracing the ancient route, once taken by foot, to Badrinath.

The scenario is quite overwhelming and fills one with a sense of tranquility. As one progresses from one place to another, the gurdwaras that are located here and managed by the Hemkunt Trust offer food and lodging with much warmth and hospitality. The route is daunting, the climate even more so, but what keeps the pilgrim going is the thought of reaching that **ultimate destination - Hemkunt!**

RISHIKESH



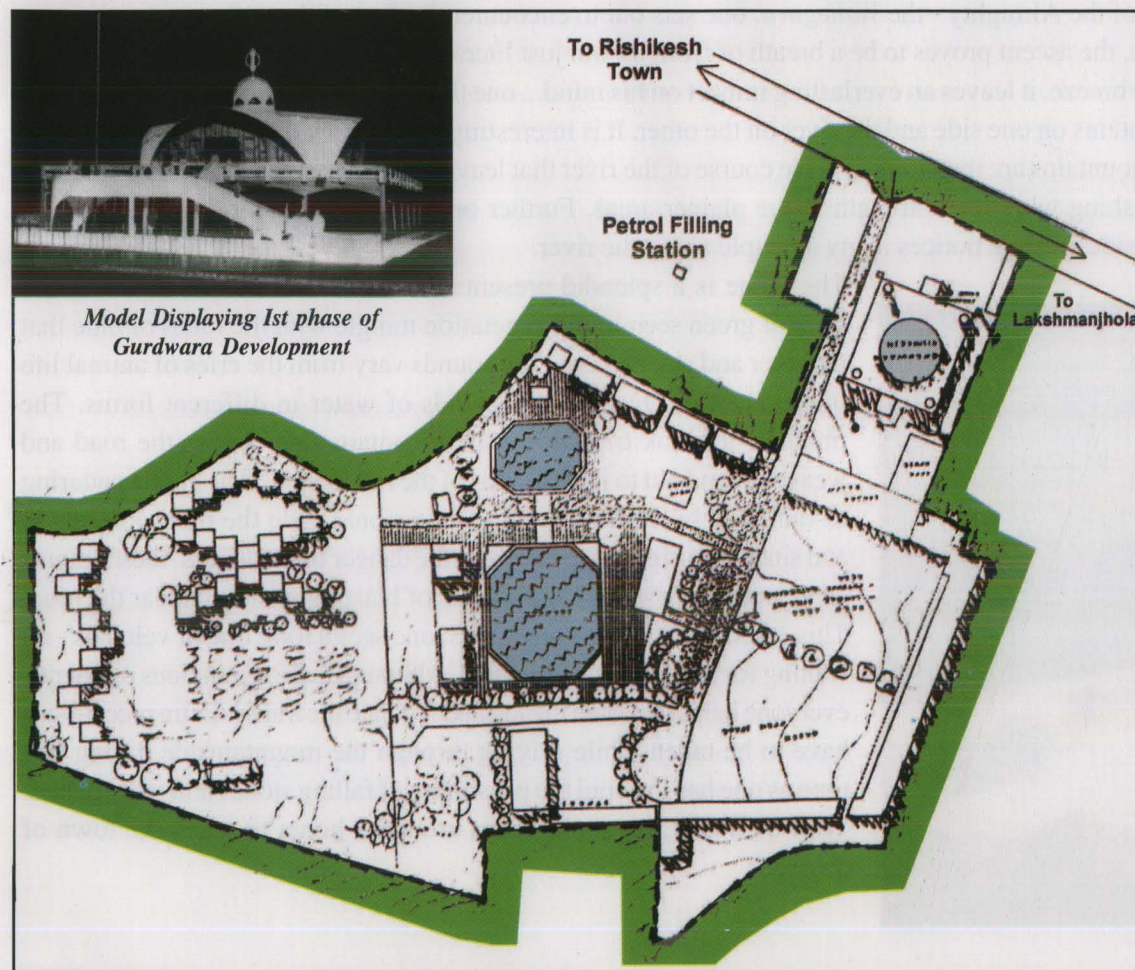
Gurdwara Rishikesh

Rishikesh, situated along the banks of the river Ganges is considered a holy town because of its association with the holiest river in India. This town can be termed as a **pivotal** point because many sacred journeys start from here. It is basically from **here** that the **actual traverse to Hemkunt begins**.

With the advent of June, pilgrims throng Rishikesh to begin their pilgrimage to Hemkunt, Badrinath and Kedarnath. The Sikh pilgrims, coming in *jathas* or individually from India and abroad, make their first halt at the beautiful gurdwara that is situated at Rishikesh. Located near a bustling market place, the gurdwara complex covers a large territory which includes provision for lodging and also a school for orphans besides the other essential components of a gurdwara. The surrounding mountainscape and a nearby bubbling brook make for a pleasant environment. It is here that the tired pilgrims usually halt for the night to revive their energy and recharge their spirits for the major travel scheduled to begin in the early hours of the next day. However, the primary duty of the pilgrim once he enters the complex is to first pay obeissance to the *Guru Granth Sahib* housed in the *darbar hall*.

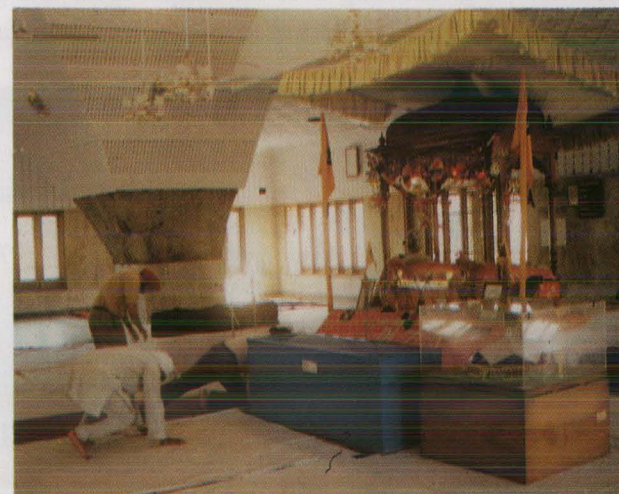
The gurdwara is a two storeyed building on the upper floor of which is the *darbar hall*. An impressive decor with a finely worked ceiling, the *darbar hall* resounds with the voices of the *granthi*, the school children and the pilgrims reciting their prayers. Many people

volunteer to do *sewa* at the *langar* and a growing kinship is established amongst virtual strangers - all enthusiastic at the prospect of going to Hemkunt. As evening edges forward, there is a nip in the air that gives one the first feel of the journey ahead. Before the evening prayers many people take time to revel in the beauty of the locale. The *sarovar* makes for interesting viewing as it teems with large fishes. As nightfall approaches, the tired traveller is lulled to sleep with the sounds of the night and the occasional rainfall.



Layout of the Gurdwara Rishikesh complex

The gurdwara complex is spread over 5.0 hectares and has an accommodation for 4000 *yatris* besides having residential facilities for the *sewadar* and the orphan children adopted by the gurdwara. The complex also acts as a transit camp where storage of materials



Interior of the gurdwara

for construction activities at the gurdwaras ahead is done.

RISHIKESH TO SRINAGAR

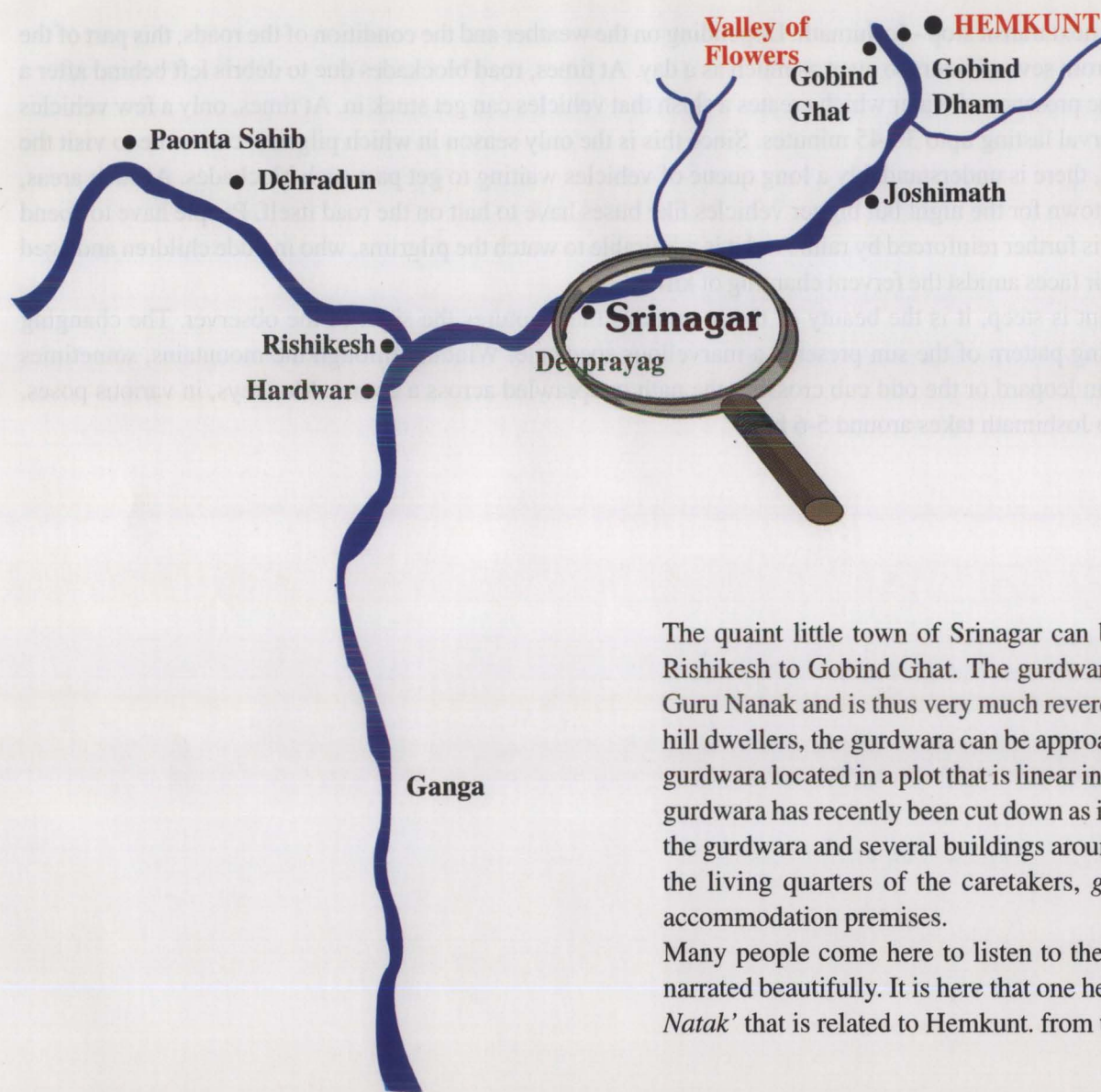
The next morning begins early - at 4:30 a.m. - with the voice of the *granthi* initiating the day's prayers. The journey has to begin early since the foremost objective of the pilgrim is to reach Gobind Ghat within the same day while making transit stops at Srinagar and Joshimath. Since the duration of the journey is long and one can be subjected to blockages caused due to landslides or spells of bad weather, it is advisable to do so. After an *ardas* to pray for the success of the journey ahead and with the blessings of the Almighty - the *Waheguru*, one sets out to encounter the first of the paths.

For people coming from the crowded streets of the cities, the ascent proves to be a breath of fresh air not just literally but also in terms of visual appeal. And as the pilgrim draws in lungfuls of the mountainside breeze, it leaves an everlasting impact on his mind... one that would draw him back to this place again. The road is bounded by the sheer face of the mountains on one side and the river on the other. It is interesting to note how these two elements duel and how both seem to emerge victorious. Although the mountains are imposing, it is the course of the river that leaves the onlooker spellbound, widening and narrowing, bubbling over the steeper areas and gushing with quiet strength in the plainer areas. Further on, one passes by bridges that tie two mountains together. Clusters of townships lie on the far side and one notices many a temple along the river.



A view of Hemganga

The scene is a splendid presentation of colours and sounds. Various hues of green seen in the vegetation mingle with the tones of blue that the river and sky present. The sounds vary from the cries of animal life in the nearby forests to the sounds of water in different forms. The tinkle of a brook trips down the mountain side, across the road and weaves in and out to join the roar of the river below. The gentle pattering of rain, that becomes more than occasional once the monsoon sets in and since persistent rainfall brings the danger of landslides, these sounds are usually followed by the sounds of blasting stones to clear the road. This calls for halts and sometimes, one sees a long line of vehicles - all waiting for the debris to be cleared. Although there are anxious moments, everyone helps to hasten the job and regulate the traffic. Extra precautions have to be taken while driving through the mountainside during this time as one has to avoid the possibility of falling stones and other debris. With the result, it usually takes around 5 hours to reach the town of Srinagar.



Gurdwara Srinagar

The quaint little town of Srinagar can be considered as the mid point of the route from Rishikesh to Gobind Ghat. The gurdwara at Srinagar is said to have been once visited by Guru Nanak and is thus very much revered. Set amidst a market place managed by the local hill dwellers, the gurdwara can be approached through a narrow lane. It is a relatively small gurdwara located in a plot that is linear in form. An old tree that used to hide the facade of the gurdwara has recently been cut down as its growing roots were damaging the foundations of the gurdwara and several buildings around. The single storeyed gurdwara is surrounded by the living quarters of the caretakers, *granthi* etc., the *langar* hall and some additional accommodation premises.

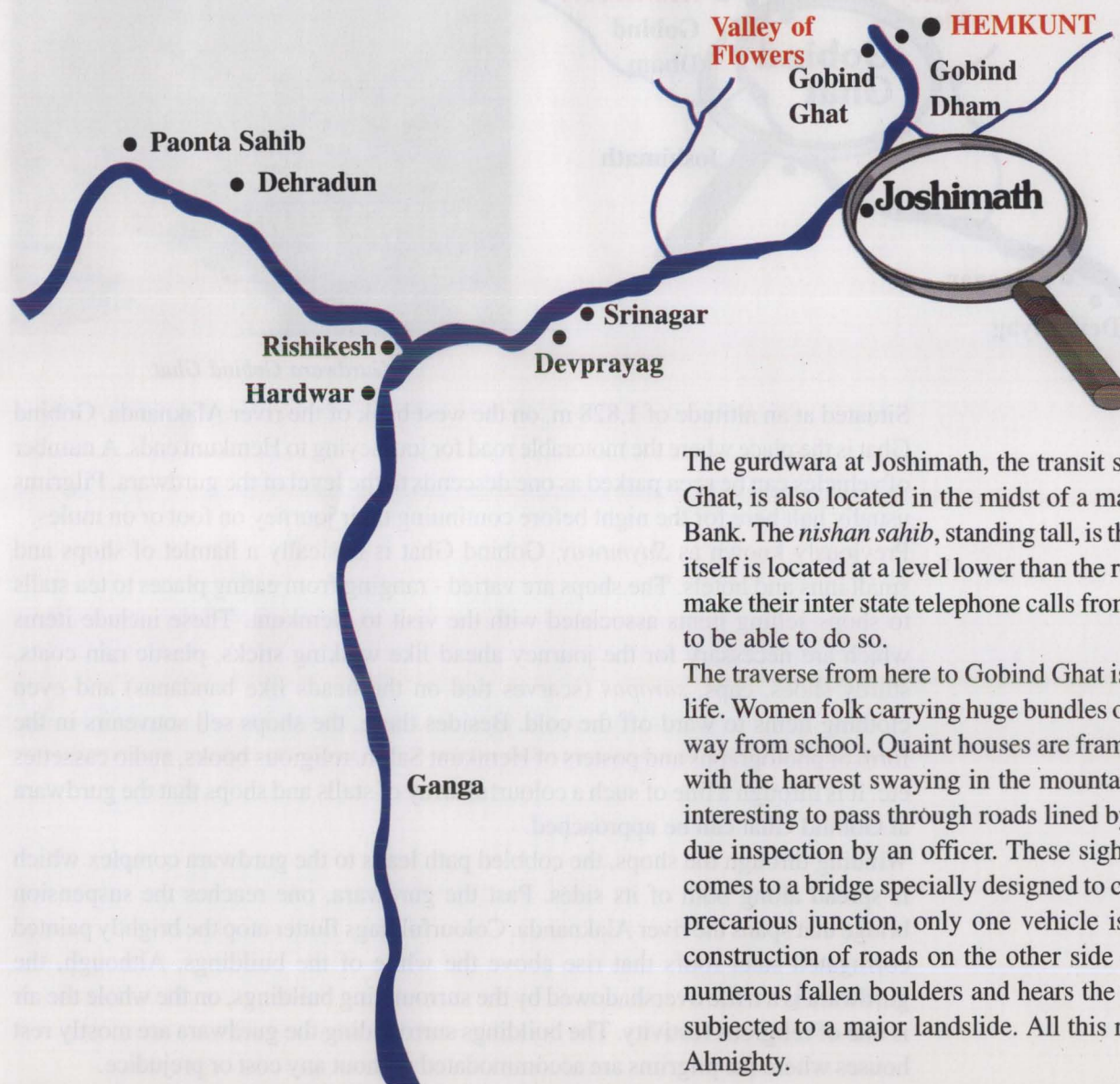
Many people come here to listen to the tale of Guru Nanak's visit to this place which is narrated beautifully. It is here that one hears an inspiring rendition of a portion of '*Bachitra Natak*' that is related to Hemkunt. from the *granthi*, which leaves a lasting impression.

SRINAGAR TO JOSHIMATH

After the halt at Srinagar, one proceeds towards the next transit stop - Joshimath. Depending on the weather and the condition of the roads, this part of the sojourn can take a long time - sometimes ranging from several hours to even as much as a day. At times, road blockades due to debris left behind after a blast can make the road even more dangerous by the presence of water which creates a slush that vehicles can get stuck in. At times, only a few vehicles are allowed to pass at one time followed by an interval lasting upto 30-45 minutes. Since this is the only season in which pilgrims can come to visit the holy places of Hemkunt, Badrinath and Kedarnath, there is understandably a long queue of vehicles waiting to get past such blockades. At such areas, smaller vehicles can still turn back to the previous town for the night but bigger vehicles like buses have to halt on the road itself. People have to spend the night amidst the chill of the mountain air which is further reinforced by rain. And it is admirable to watch the pilgrims, who include children and aged people, brave all these obstacles with a smile on their faces amidst the fervent chanting of kirtan!

On this particular part of the route, since the ascent is steep, it is the beauty of the mountains that captures the sight of the observer. The changing sciagraphy seen on the mountains with the changing pattern of the sun presents a marvellous spectacle. Winding through the mountains, sometimes around dusk - one can catch the sight of a mountain leopard or the odd cub crossing the path or sprawled across a corner. Monkeys, in various poses, strike a funny picture. On the whole, the journey to Joshimath takes around 5-6 hrs.

JOSHIMATH

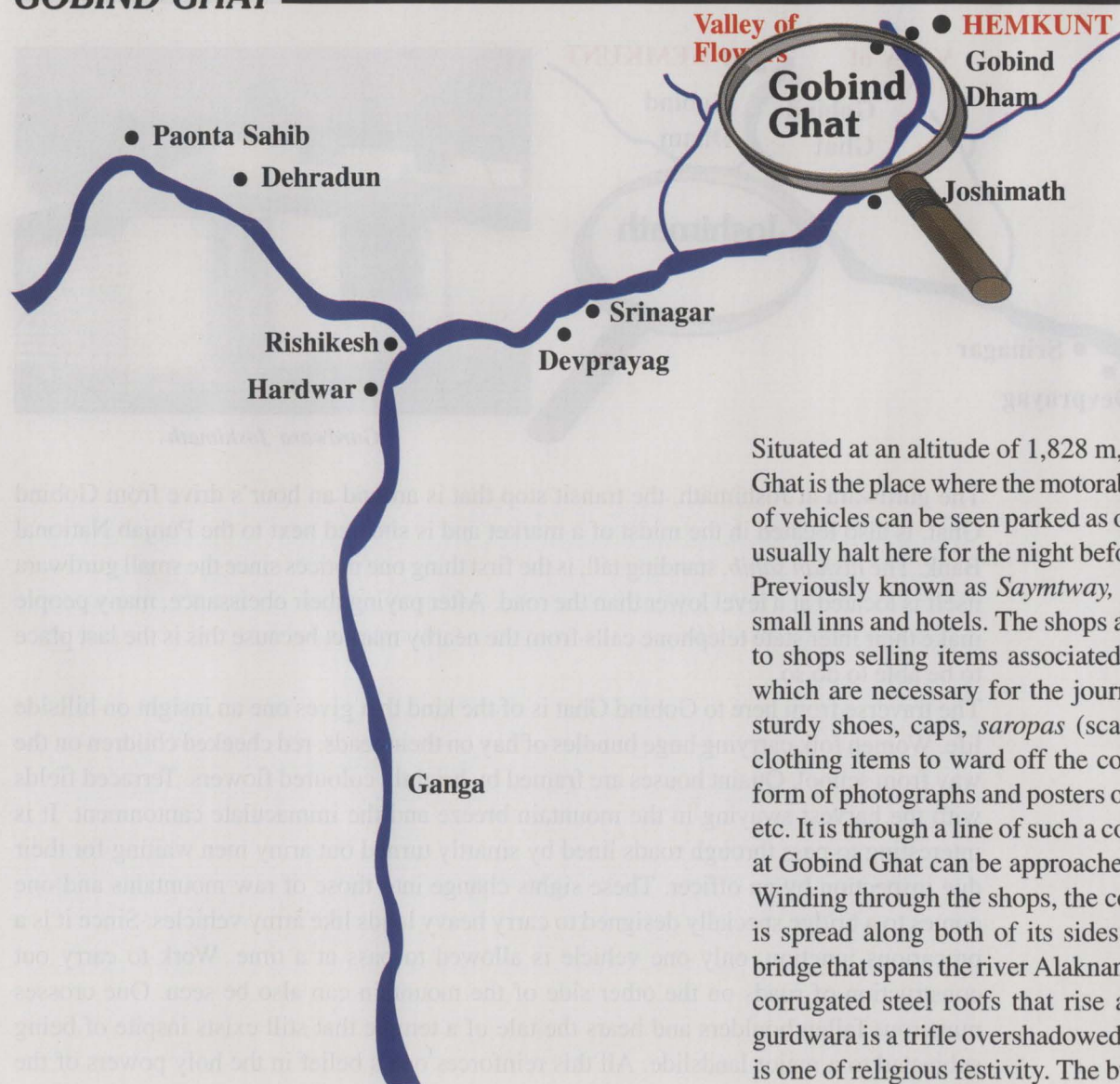


Gurdwara Joshimath

The gurdwara at Joshimath, the transit stop that is around an hour's drive from Gobind Ghat, is also located in the midst of a market and is situated next to the Punjab National Bank. The *nishan sahib*, standing tall, is the first thing one notices since the small gurdwara itself is located at a level lower than the road. After paying their obeissance, many people make their inter state telephone calls from the nearby market because this is the last place to be able to do so.

The traverse from here to Gobind Ghat is of the kind that gives one an insight on hillside life. Women folk carrying huge bundles of hay on their heads, red cheeked children on the way from school. Quaint houses are framed by brightly coloured flowers. Terraced fields with the harvest swaying in the mountain breeze and the immaculate cantonment. It is interesting to pass through roads lined by smartly turned out army men waiting for their due inspection by an officer. These sights change into those of raw mountains and one comes to a bridge specially designed to carry heavy loads like army vehicles. Since it is a precarious junction, only one vehicle is allowed to pass at a time. Work to carry out construction of roads on the other side of the mountain can also be seen. One crosses numerous fallen boulders and hears the tale of a temple that still exists inspite of being subjected to a major landslide. All this reinforces one's belief in the holy powers of the Almighty.

GOBIND GHAT

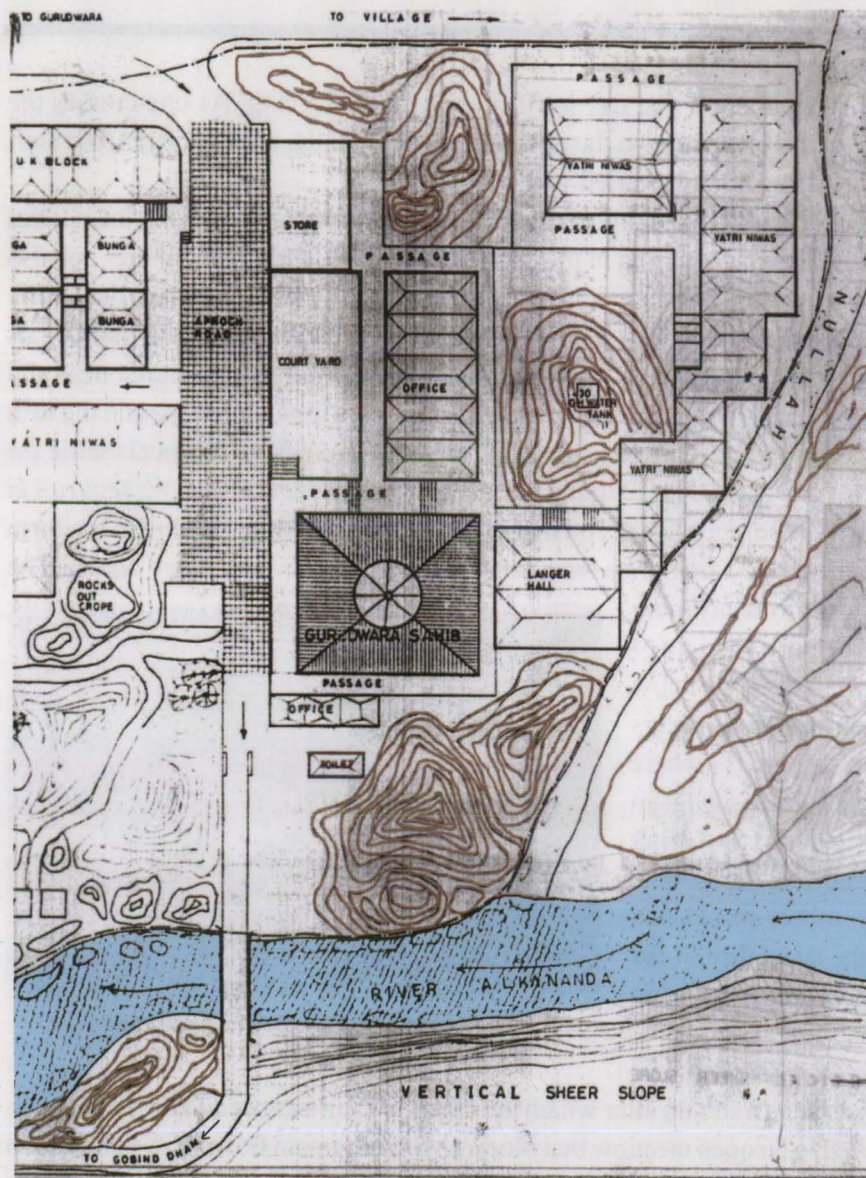


Gurdwara Gobind Ghat

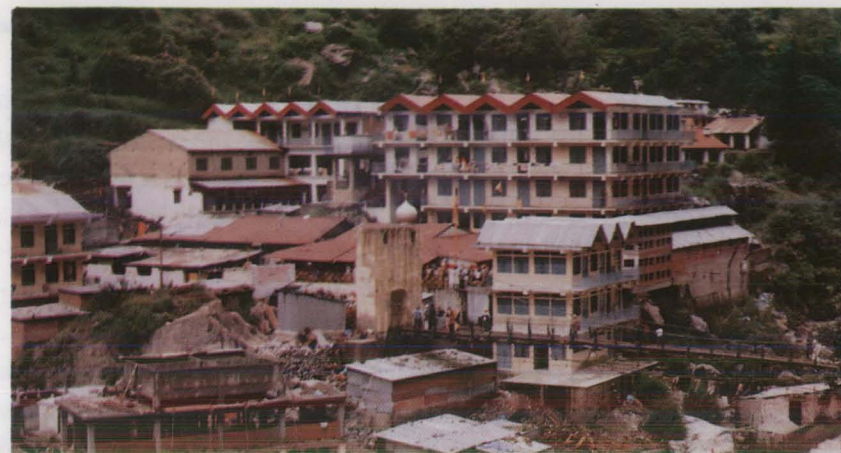
Situated at an altitude of 1,828 m, on the west bank of the river Alaknanda, Gobind Ghat is the place where the motorable road for journeying to Hemkunt ends. A number of vehicles can be seen parked as one descends to the level of the gurdwara. Pilgrims usually halt here for the night before continuing their journey on foot or on mules.

Previously known as *Saymtway*, Gobind Ghat is basically a hamlet of shops and small inns and hotels. The shops are varied - ranging from eating places to tea stalls to shops selling items associated with the visit to Hemkunt. These include items which are necessary for the journey ahead like walking sticks, plastic rain coats, sturdy shoes, caps, *saropas* (scarves tied on the heads like bandanas) and even clothing items to ward off the cold. Besides these, the shops sell souvenirs in the form of photographs and posters of Hemkunt Sahib, religious books, audio cassettes etc. It is through a line of such a colourful array of stalls and shops that the gurdwara at Gobind Ghat can be approached.

Winding through the shops, the cobbled path leads to the gurdwara complex which is spread along both of its sides. Past the gurdwara, one reaches the suspension bridge that spans the river Alaknanda. Colourful flags flutter atop the brightly painted corrugated steel roofs that rise above the white of the buildings. Although, the gurdwara is a trifle overshadowed by the surrounding buildings, on the whole the air is one of religious festivity. The buildings surrounding the gurdwara are mostly rest houses where the pilgrims are accommodated without any cost or prejudice.



Layout plan of Gobind Ghat



Gobind Ghat, seen from across the suspension bridge

Luggage that is not required for the journey ahead can also be left behind. The *langar* at the gurdwara offers simple but hot meals to the pilgrim. Strangers befriend each other while doing *sewa* side by side at the *langar*. Enthusiastic sessions of *kirtan* are held in the gurdwara and people boost the spirits of some who cannot undertake the journey due to ill-health. All pray for the success of their journey.

For people who cannot make the journey on foot, there is the availability of the services of mules, porters and sedan chairs. The mules, with their colourful tassels, can be found tied near the suspension bridge. Their prices have to be negotiated with the *ghora walas* (mule brokers), most of whom come from the plains and some from the nearby villages. The mules are brought here at the beginning of the season and are again taken back at the end of it. The mules are also engaged in the carrying of construction material for work on the roads ahead and the gurdwaras at both Gobind Dham and Hemkunt. *Kandhi walas* (porters who carry bamboo baskets with the help of ropes on their *kandhis* or shoulders) can be availed of to carry luggage, children and aged or ill people. Another travelling option is that of the *dandi walas* (groups of four porters who carry sedan chairs supported on *dandis* or poles) who can carry people, unable to travel by the other modes, up the steep slopes.

GOBIND GHAT TO GOBIND DHAM

Depending on when one reaches Gobind Ghat, the ascent to Gobind Dham begins either on that day itself or early next morning. As one crosses the suspension bridge spanning the Alaknanda, one feels the trembling and shaking of the bridge due to the powerful gushing of the river beneath. The start of the long zig zag winding path up the mountains can be seen from here itself and the climb is started with a prayer.

The path consists of stones of various shapes and sizes set into the earth and is wide enough to allow two mules to pass through. Often, one hears cries of the *ghora walas* on the way down urging the others to get to one side of the path. The manoeuvring of the path is not only difficult for the mules but also for humans. The monsoons make the path slippery and it is difficult to get a foothold. It is best and advisable to tread on the stones and not the earthy portions because they can degenerate due to pressure. The *yatris* (travellers) help and encourage each other. After about two kilometres, the trail begins to follow a stream - the Hem Ganga - that originates from the Hemkunt lake and finally falls into the Alaknanda. The sound of the stream as it trips and tumbles over the boulders forms the background of the major portion of the journey. Drinking in the beauty of the surrounding mountainscape and the lush forests, the pilgrim slowly edges forward. Three kilometres from Gobind Ghat is the village of Pulna, at a height of 1,920 m., where the locals settle for the winter and through which the trail passes. Whenever one pilgrim sees another, he greets him with the words 'Waheguruji ka Khalsa, Waheguruji ki Fateh!' (The Khalsa is the God's, The Victory is God's). People on the way down encourage the ones on the ascent often distributing *prasad* in the form of *patashas* (sugar crystals), dry fruit, sweets etc. There is a sense of togetherness and familiarity even amongst strangers as they forge ahead. The pilgrims keep counting and following how many kilometres they have covered and how many more are to be covered. Around five kilometres after Pulna lies Bhyundar, which is located at a height of 2,239 m. and where the villagers settle during summer. The pilgrim gets his first view of the snow capped peaks from here. Throughout the route and specially around the villages, one can find clusters of tea stalls - temporary structures made from local materials and roofed with plastic sheets - where the pilgrim can halt to rest, eat and stretch their legs. There are even long benches where a pilgrim can take a nap if he so desires. There is also an area for the mules where they can rest and drink water. These tea stalls are run by the local villagers who switch to doing so because of the income that this season of pilgrims and tourists generates. The stalls hawk a plethora of hot snacks and drinks along with an assortment of biscuits, sweets, chocolate bars etc. But the speciality of the region is the gram soup - a steaming concoction of black grams spices! It is wonderful to sip the hot broth, see the beautiful surroundings and feel the tiredness ebb.



Taking a break at the roadside stalls

Rejuvenated, the pilgrim again begins the climb stopping at times to read the various sayings and messages tacked onto the trees. A kilometre from Bhyundar is a small bridge that spans a stream after which the climb is even steeper and the path rocky. This path winds through dense forests and takes longer. From the forests, one is led to an open meadow that blooms with mountain flowers. A helipad can also be seen. From here it does not take long before the corrugated roofs of Gobind Dham come into view. For the exhausted yet enthusiastic pilgrim or tourist, this twelve kilometre trek from Gobind Ghat to Gobind Dham takes around four to seven hours.

GOBIND DHAM



Gobind Dham, translated as the abode of Gobind, is located at a height of 3,048 m. It is here that both pilgrims and trekkers halt for the night before heading for the final sojourn to Hemkunt. Gobind Dham is a place that becomes active only between the months of June and October. Along with Hemkunt, Gobind Dham was amongst the first places at such altitudes to be surveyed by the Survey of India.

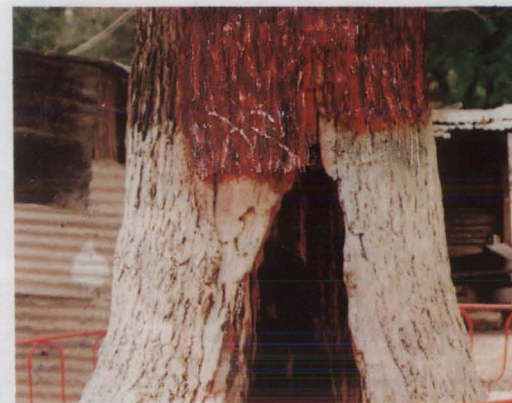
Similar to Gobind Ghat, Gobind Dham also consists of shops and lodges besides the government tourist and forest rest houses. Through the passage of time, the number of shops has risen to cater to the demands of the growing number of pilgrims and tourists. As in the shops of Gobind Ghat, the shops here also sell various items necessary for the journey ahead and a wide variety of souvenirs. Straight down the path and past the gurdwara are resting places and halts for the mules.



Gobind Dham Gurdwara

Aching feet and tired spirits are instantly revived by the *karah prasad* served at the gurdwara. The gurdwara at Gobind Dham is also considered as a holy place similar to Hemkunt Sahib. The present gurdwara is located towards the right as one enters the complex. Located near the second gate is the tree in the hollowed trunk of which *Havaladar* Modan Singh had taken shelter many a time. The tree is accorded holy status and many people pose for photographs with it. The gurdwara complex also includes various accommodation premises where a large number of pilgrims can halt for the night. Even though they are exhausted, one is amazed to see the pilgrims immediately get down to performing different aspects of *sewa*. With *shabads* echoing in the kitchen and *langar sewa* at its pace, the exhaustion is forgotten and new acquaintances are made. Everyone is eager to reach Hemkunt Sahib and there is a wave of enthusiasm in the air.

A new gurdwara, designed by architect S. Manmohan Singh Siali, is to be constructed in the complex. In September in the year 1998, the foundation of the gurdwara was laid following a ceremony and *ardas* by the granthi.



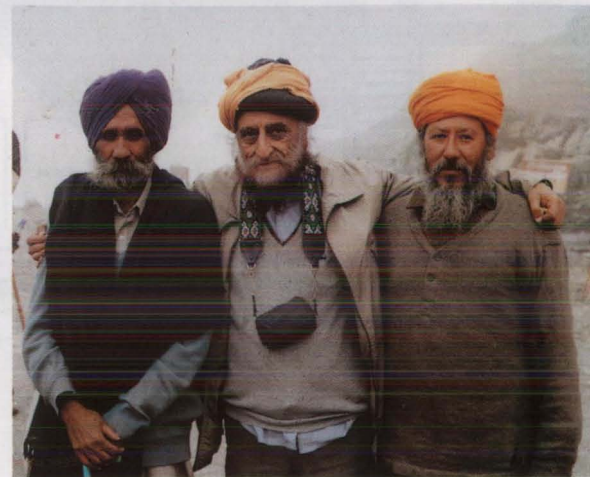
*The tree in the hollowed trunk of which
Hav. Modan Singh took shelter*



Nanda Singh Chauhan

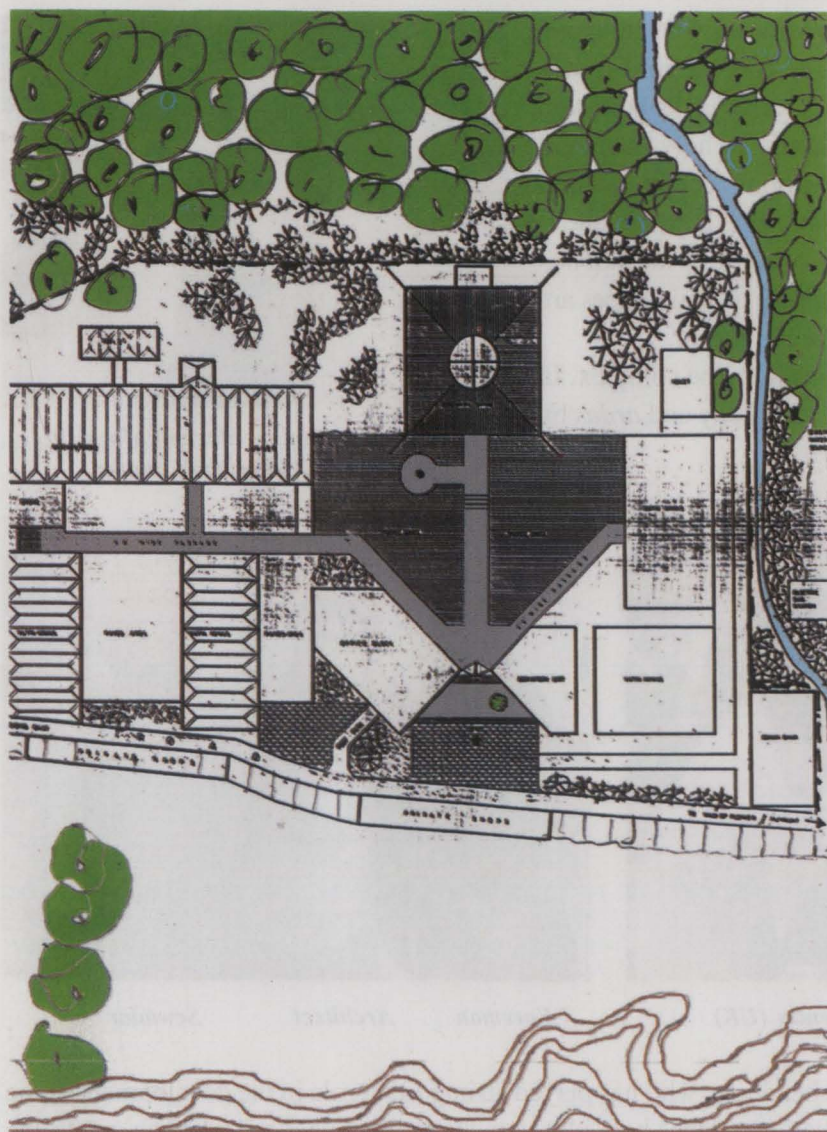


Bibi Tarvinder Kaur of Coventry (UK)

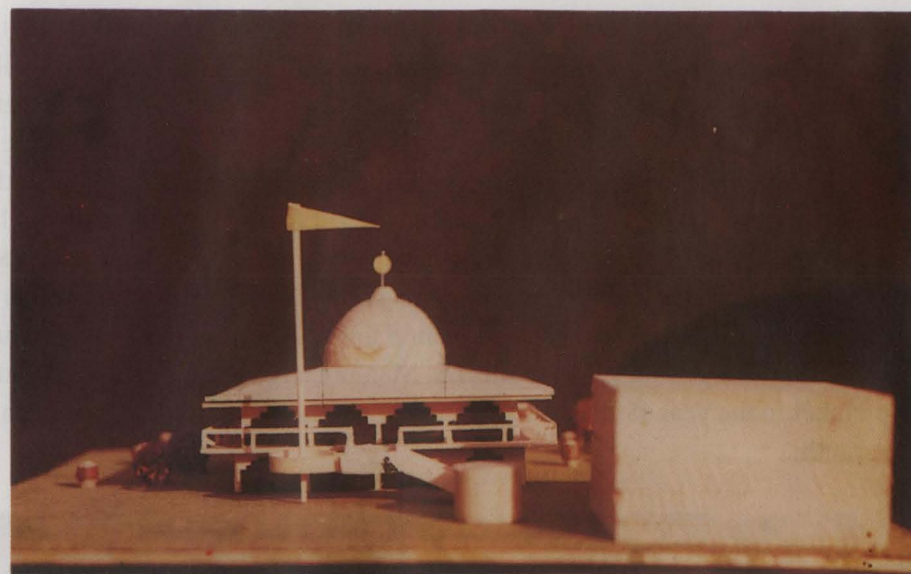


Foreman Architect Sewadar

Present along with the architect was Nanda Singh Chauhan, the son of the village headman, who has played an important role in the development of the gurdwaras at Hemkunt and Gobind Dham. His lined face reveals his life long devotion to these holy places and is further enhanced when he recalls the tales of the discovery and the history of them. Nanda Singh Chauhan's **long time association** with *Havaladar* Modan Singh and other peers inspired an absolutely captivating rendition of the tale about the search for Hemkunt which enthralled his audience.

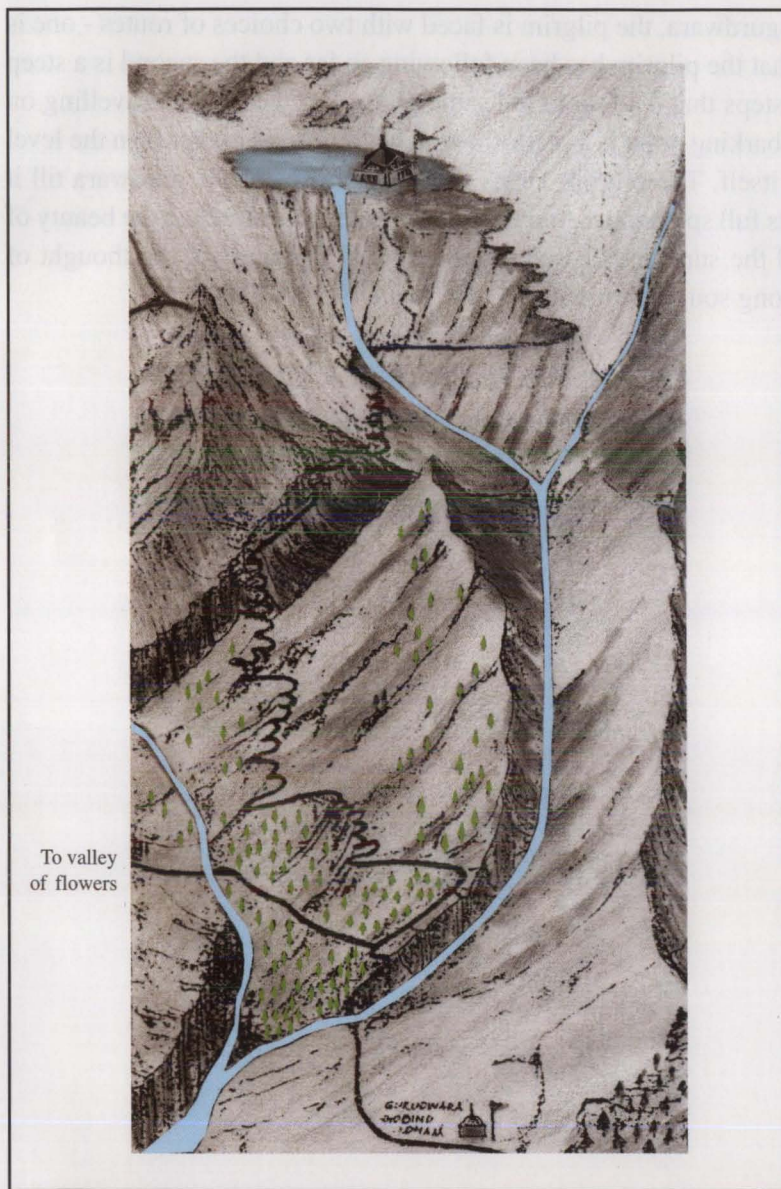


Layout plan of the new gurdwara at Gobind Dham



The gurdwara, after it is completed, as can be seen from the model

It was from him that one heard how people learnt about the holy status of Gobind Dham. It is said that a shaft of sunlight shone upon the open *Guru Granth Sahib* at the gurdwara and a celestial voice proclaimed that the place of Gobind Dham too would be regarded as a 'pilgrimage'. Such interesting tales heard from the man, named Nanda Singh Chauhan, whose dedication serves as an example to devotees makes the journey even more worthwhile.



An artistic representation of the route from Gobind Dham to Hemkunt

GOBIND DHAM TO HEMKUNT

The final ascent...! The pilgrims are all geared to undertake the final part of the long journey which would lead them to their desired destination. With the first rays of the sun, the gurdwara complex springs to life....humming with activity as the pilgrims prepare to embark. Amidst drizzles and biting cold weather, the pilgrims set out, some of them bare foot. The path outside the gurdwara is a picture of activity at its peak with the pilgrims, the *ghora walas* and the porters all leaving at the same time. The climb can take from 3-5 hours.

The path that leads from Gobind Dham to Hemkunt is far steeper than the trail that leads from Gobind Ghat to Gobind Dham. As stressed before, the monsoons play havoc with the paths causing them to become wet and slippery. Pilgrims take respite from the frequent spells of rainfall under their plastic raincoats. Wisps of mist surround them and the snow capped mountains all around hide behind a screen of thick fog. But the pilgrims brace themselves against the vagaries of the climate by chanting the holy verse of '*Satnaam Waheguru*' (the Almighty's name is the only true name) and singing *kirtan*. They stop once in a while, at the tea stalls along the way, to take rest or eat. The eyes of the pilgrims search for the *nishan sahib*, indicative of how much further the pilgrim has to travel. It is also commemorative of the end of the ascent and acts as a sign of encouragement and hope for the weary pilgrim.

During the course of the journey from Gobind Ghat to Hemkunt via Gobind Dham, one gets so engrossed in the marvels of nature and glimpses of the snow clad peaks visible at a distance that one loses count of time... the date, the day, the hour. With the mind dwelling on the task of climbing to the ultimate place, where *Dusht Daman* had meditated to be one with the Almighty, the innermost thoughts equate the experience of the journey to one being in heaven.



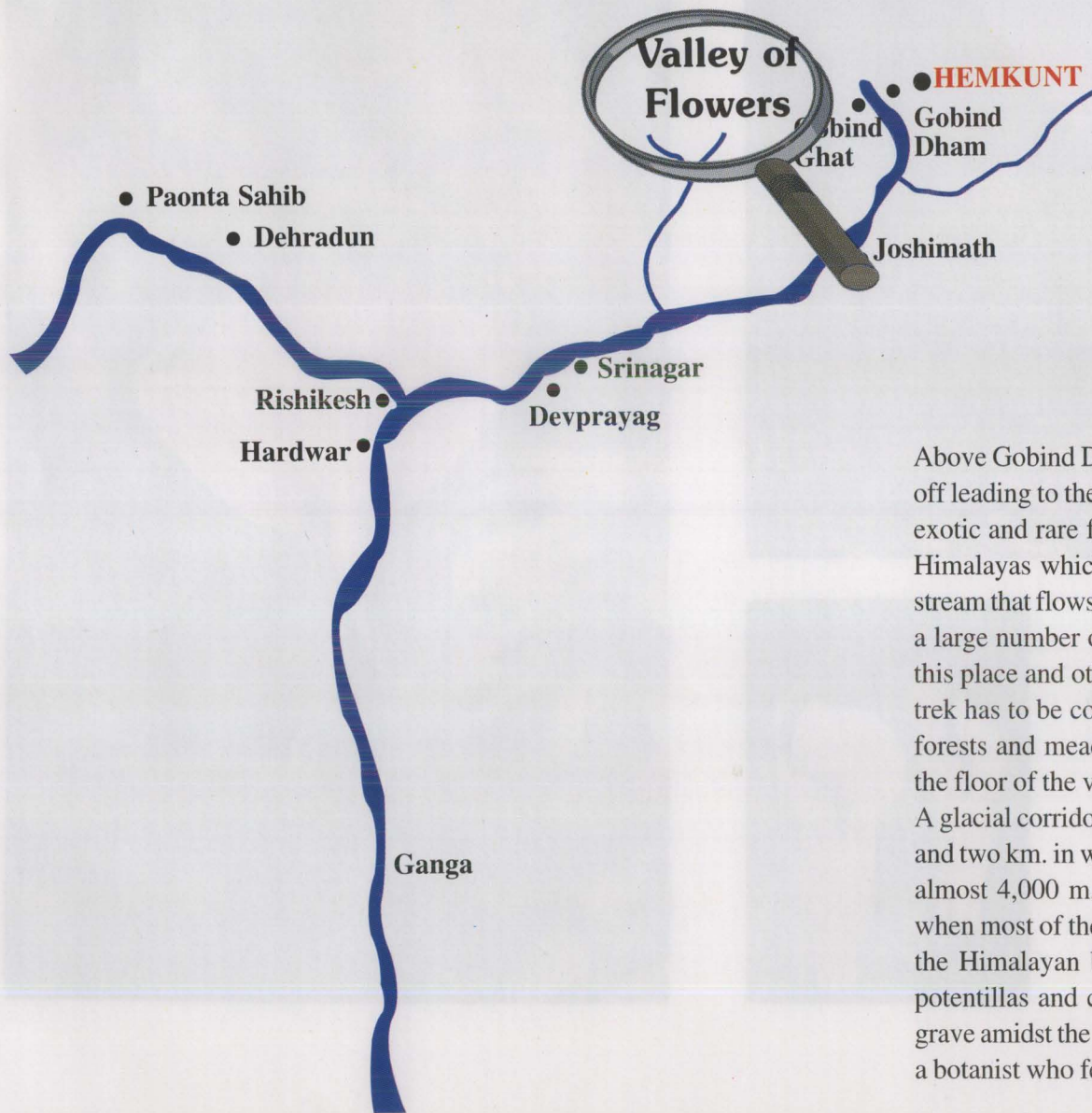
Gobind Dham, as seen from a higher altitude



Pilgrims approaching Hemkunt

Not far from the gurdwara, the pilgrim is faced with two choices of routes - one is that of the path that the pilgrim has been following so far and the second is a steep stretch of 1,175 steps that lead up to the same place. For the people travelling on mules, the disembarking point is a platform which is at a level higher than the level of the gurdwara itself. The pilgrim keeps getting glimpses of the gurdwara till it reveals itself in its full splendour! And the pilgrim is left awestruck at the beauty of the structure and the surroundings and is filled with happiness at the thought of having reached long sought destination.... **HEMKUNT SAHIB !**

VALLEY OF FLOWERS



Above Gobind Dham, the main path to gurdwara Hemkunt branches off leading to the Valley of Flowers. The Valley of Flowers, a dale of exotic and rare flowers, is the smallest national park situated in the Himalayas which was created to protect the catchment area of the stream that flows past Gobind Dham. The beauty of this valley attracts a large number of tourists some of whom come trekking just to see this place and others who come to visit Hemkunt. A three kilometre trek has to be covered to reach this valley. This trail passes through forests and meadows, across rivers and an avalanche slope, before the floor of the valley opens up before it.

A glacial corridor, the Valley of Flowers measures eight km. in length and two km. in width. The floor of the Valley slopes from 3,500 m. to almost 4,000 m. The Valley is a riot of colours during September when most of the flowers are in bloom. One can find flowers such as the Himalayan blue poppy, rare varieties of primula and orchids, potentillas and campanulas and many more. The Valley also has a grave amidst the flowers - one belonging to Ms. Joan Margaret Legge, a botanist who fell to her death while collecting floral specimens.

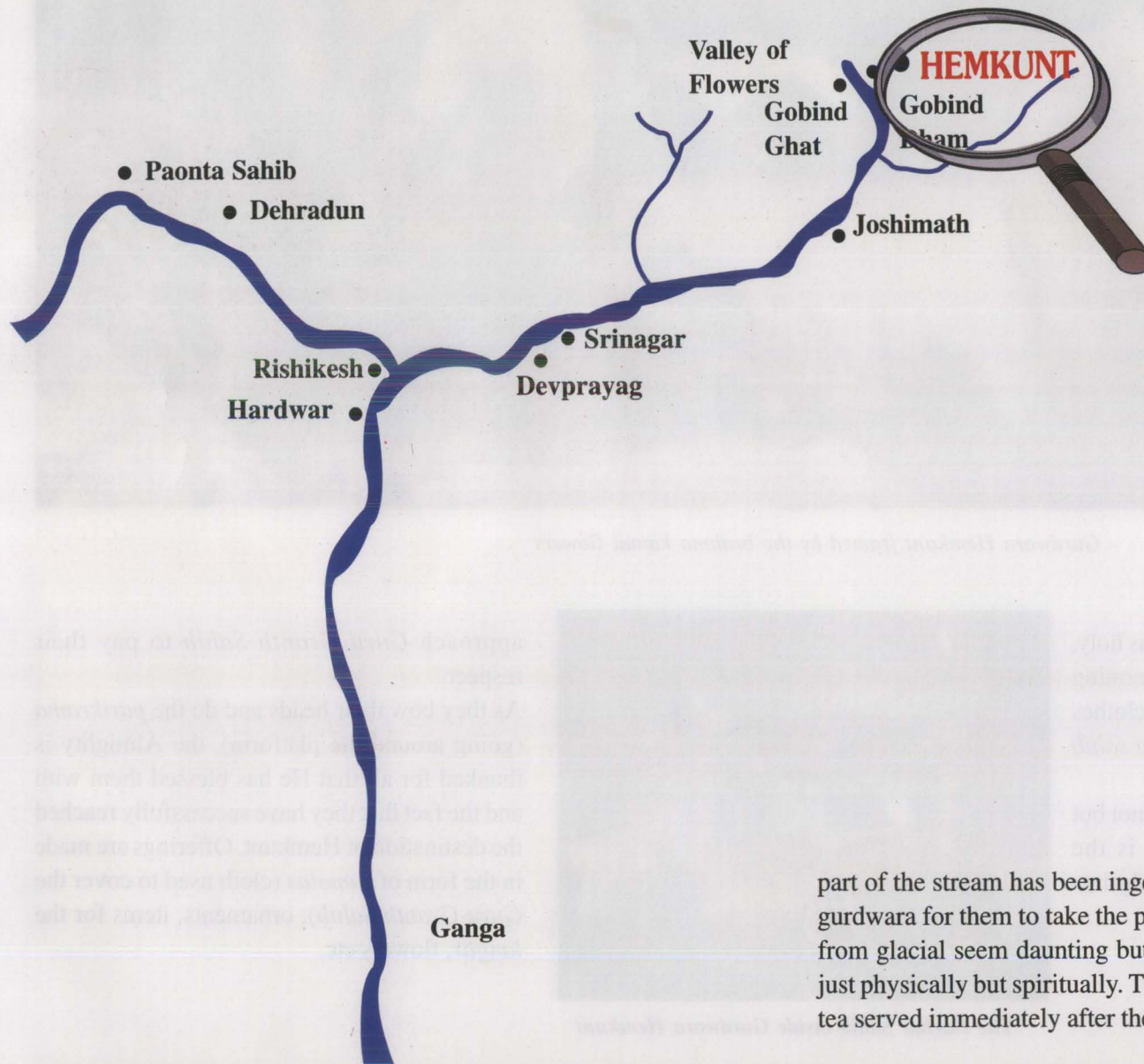


A view of Valley of Flower

*Blue poppy, potentillas and campanulas which
paints the valley pink, red and purple during
July and August*



THE FINAL DESTINATION - HEMKUNT



The Nishan Sahib at Hemkunt Sahib

With the place shrouded in fog, the pilgrim gets the impression that the two storeyed pentagonal gurdwara is seemingly suspended amidst the seven peaks and anchored to the ground by the gleaming silver of the Hemkunt lake.

The pilgrim is overwhelmed by the *darshan* (sight) of Sri Hemkunt Sahib and the fact that one has at last reached the final destination. A plunge into the *sarovar* to cleanse oneself is a must. This is a holy ritual followed in most gurdwaras. The men do so in the open while for the ladies,

part of the stream has been ingeniously diverted into the lower floor of the gurdwara for them to take the plunge in privacy. The icy waters originating from glacial seem daunting but the *ishnaan* (holy bath) refreshes one, not just physically but spiritually. The cold is quelled with the piping cups of hot tea served immediately after the *ishnaan*.



Gurdwara Hemkunt framed by the brahma kamal flowers

Considering the water of the Hemkunt lake as holy, many people fill their bottles with the water terming it as 'amrit' (nectar). The pilgrims don new clothes after the *ishnaan* and head towards the *darbar sahib* situated on the upper floor.

As one climbs up to the *darbar hall*, one cannot but feel the urge and desire to pray - such is the atmosphere. Across the carpeted hall, the pilgrims



The Darbar Sahib inside Gurdwara Hemkunt

approach *Guru Granth Sahib* to pay their respect.

As they bow their heads and do the *parikrama* (going around the platform), the Almighty is thanked for all that He has blessed them with and the fact that they have successfully reached the destination of Hemkunt. Offerings are made in the form of *rumalas* (cloth used to cover the *Guru Granth Sahib*), ornaments, items for the *langar*, flowers etc.



Singing of shabad kirtan in the gurdwara

Wrapped in blankets, the pilgrims meditate, read or recite from the *japji sahib*, sing *shabad kirtan* or just immerse themselves in the ambience of the place. Two congregational services are held at Hemkunt Sahib - one in the morning at around ten and another in the afternoon. The *granthi* tells the gathered congregation the significance of the journey proceeding on to the story of Hemkunt as it has been described in *Bachitra Natak*. Unified by the *ardas*, the people pray in unison. Cries of '*Jo bole so nihal, Sat Sri Akal!*' rent the air and are repeated a number of times. The *karah prasad* is then savoured with a unique sense of satisfaction and contentment. After the pilgrims come down from the *darbar* hall, *langar prasad* is also served.

When the fog lifts and the surroundings come into view, the pilgrims stand in front of the lake and try to locate the seven peaks which are marked by flags. Excited voices reveal the success of having been able to do so. The *sevadars* at the gurdwara then tell the pilgrims various stories about celestial vision and sounds. Many people go to the small *Laxman Mandir* near the gurdwara to pay their respects. People go around the site, discovering the beauty of the place. Some look for the *brahma kamals* - unusual flowers with a heady fragrance growing on the slopes around the lake. There are splashes of colour as various flowers bloom in pockets around the sandy banks of the lake. Entranced, people take photographs trying to capture the visual splendour in their frames.



Colourful flowers bloom on the other side of the Hemkunt lake



The rocky stretch of the bank of the Hemkunt lake



The gurdwara under snow pictured in May & early June



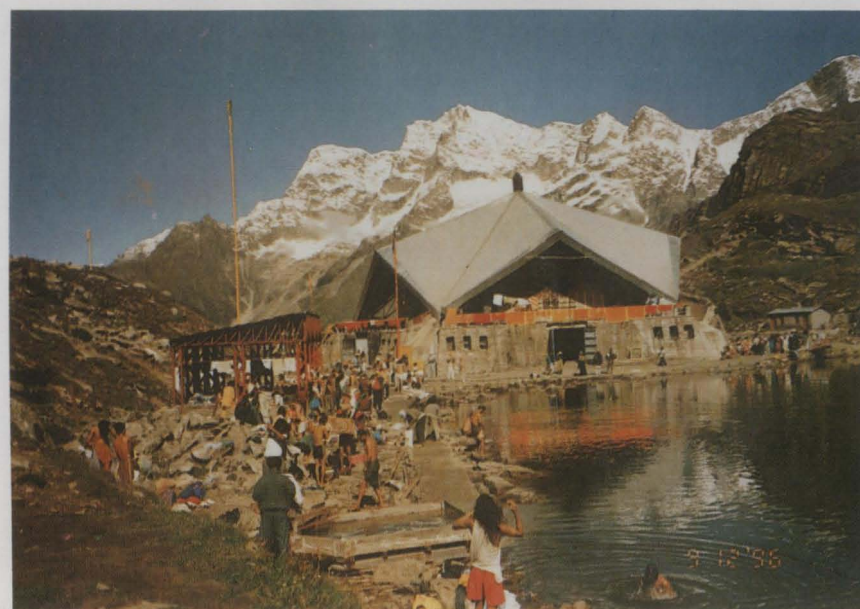
Photograph of the partially completed Gurdwara taken in 1997



Hemkunt Gurdwara appearing at last!



A view of Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib from Sarovar side



A view in the month of September

The pilgrims cannot stay beyond a few hours because the place becomes too cold with time and the air is rarefied. Therefore the descent has to start early for climbing down is as difficult as climbing up. The objective for most of the people is to either reach Gobind Dham to halt there for the night or even proceed further down to Gobind Ghat to spend a restful night.

As the pilgrim readies to undertake the journey back home, thoughts come crowding into his mind, a recollection of the past journey and the efforts put in. During the time of ascent, the entire concentration of the pilgrim is focused on the ultimate destination. The difficult terrain is crossed but it is only **now** that one realises that if even now, with better roads, it is so difficult to travel up to Hemkunt - what must it have been for the people, who made the unique and the beautiful gurdwara at Hemkunt possible, at a time with virtually non-existent roads! It is but natural for the pilgrim to utter silent words of gratitude and admiration for the people whose dedicated efforts made the gurdwara at Hemkunt **possible**. The gurdwara at Hemkunt leaves a deep impression on the pilgrim which is why, inspite of all encountered hardships, one keeps returning again to undertake the **sacred journey to Hemkunt**.





Photograph taken in August 1999

